

DEFYING THE DRAGON

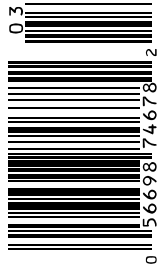
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CLIMATE CATASTROPHE

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Vol. 51 No. 3

IF YOU WANT TO GO FAST, GO ALONE; IF YOU WANT TO GO FAR, **GO TOGETHER.**



Photo by Juan Martínez Ovalle

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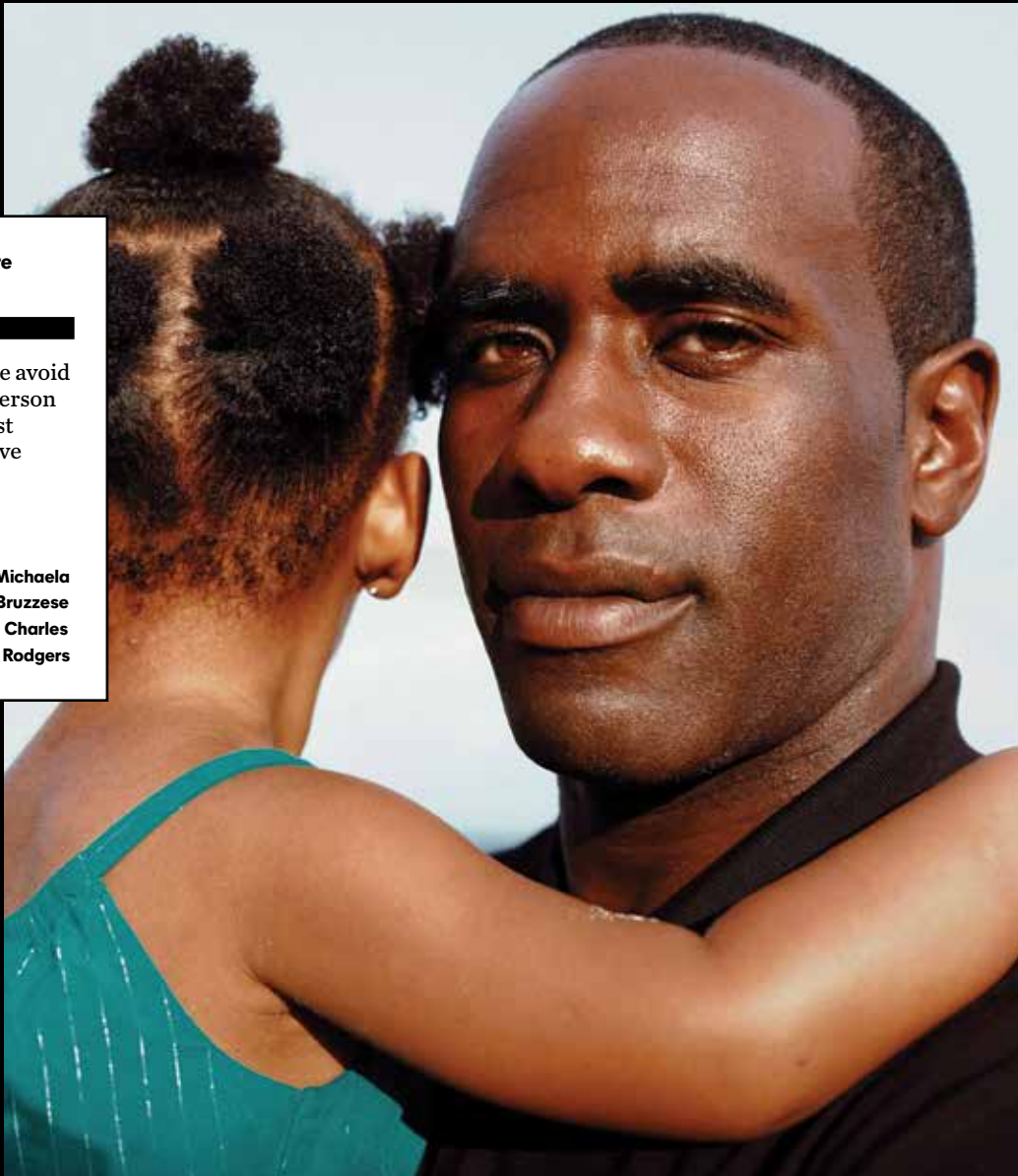
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**"THE FULL STORY IS ALWAYS
FAR MORE COMPLEX AND DEMANDS
MUCH MORE COMPLEX SOLUTIONS."**

**The Measure
of a Man**

How can we avoid
judging a person
by the worst
thing they've
done?

by Michaela
Bruzzeze
with Charles
Rodgers



30

20

Dancing in the Dragon's Jaw Climate catastrophe is upon us. How do we raise our children for joy?

by Lydia
Wylie-Kellermann

26

The Maya Remember On Mexico's Yucatán peninsula, the legacy of the ancestors reaches into the present.

by Lars
Åkerson

Voices

6	Spotlight
9	Mobilizing Hope Our political life needs the "fruits of the Spirit." by Adam Russell Taylor
	Commentary
12	Supply Chain Faith communities and worker co-ops find common cause. by Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger and Joerg Rieger
14	Creation There is no livable future without repentance. by Mark L. MacDonald
15	Media Religion reporting on LGBTQIA+ people. by Emmy Kegler
	Columns
16	The Hungry Spirit Here is my heart, O God. by Rose Marie Berger
17	Deep Economy Finding the green roots of religions. by Bill McKibben
	Eyewitness
18	Life in a Rohingya refugee camp. by Mainul Islam



37

Vision

	Culture
35	Music R&B artist Mykal Kilgore ministers to the soul. by Rebecca Riley
37	On Screen <i>Tehran</i> is a timely look at life beyond the U.S. by Da'Shawn Mosley
38	Eyes & Ears Confronting the convenience of "corporate wokeness." by Danny Duncan Collum
	Reviews
39	Books <i>The Vanishing</i> details threats to Christian communities in the Middle East. by Elizabeth Becker
40	Reaching across fault lines in <i>Portraits of Peace</i> . by Liz Bierly
	Poetry
42	You spoke a roof of stars. by Kathleen Hellen
	Living the Word
44	During Lent, we hold our past and future in tension. by T. Denise Anderson
	H'rumphs
46	Resisting the return to "normal life." by Beth Cooper-Chrismon

46

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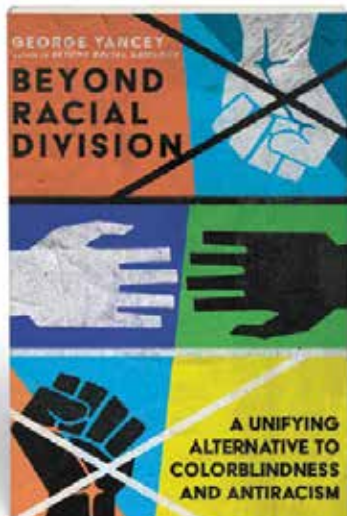
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FORGING A NEW PATH TOWARD RACIAL UNITY

"[Beyond Racial Division] navigates nuance and effectively challenges readers to get beyond rhetoric to results in their engagement of diverse others. As did Christ with arms outstretched, Yancey herein seeks to unite motivations and to hold Christ-followers in tension so that we might walk a more productive path for the sake of the gospel. . ."

—**MARK DEYMAZ**, president and CEO of Mosaic Global Network,
author of *Building a Healthy Multiethnic Church*



GEORGE YANCEY (PhD, University of Texas) is a professor at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, specializing in race/ethnicity and religion. He works to promote collaborative communication as a solution to racial unrest. His books include *Compromising Scholarship*, *One Faith No Longer*, *Hostile Environment*, *Beyond Racial Gridlock*, and *Transcending Racial Barriers*.

From the Editor

In this month's cover feature, Lydia Wylie-Kellermann wrestles with one of the central dilemmas of parenting: the tension between protecting our children and empowering them for action. That tension is made more pointed, and the stakes elevated, by the crises we face—including, perhaps most urgently, climate change. Though I imagine that balance has been one of the more challenging aspects of raising children since the invention of parenthood.

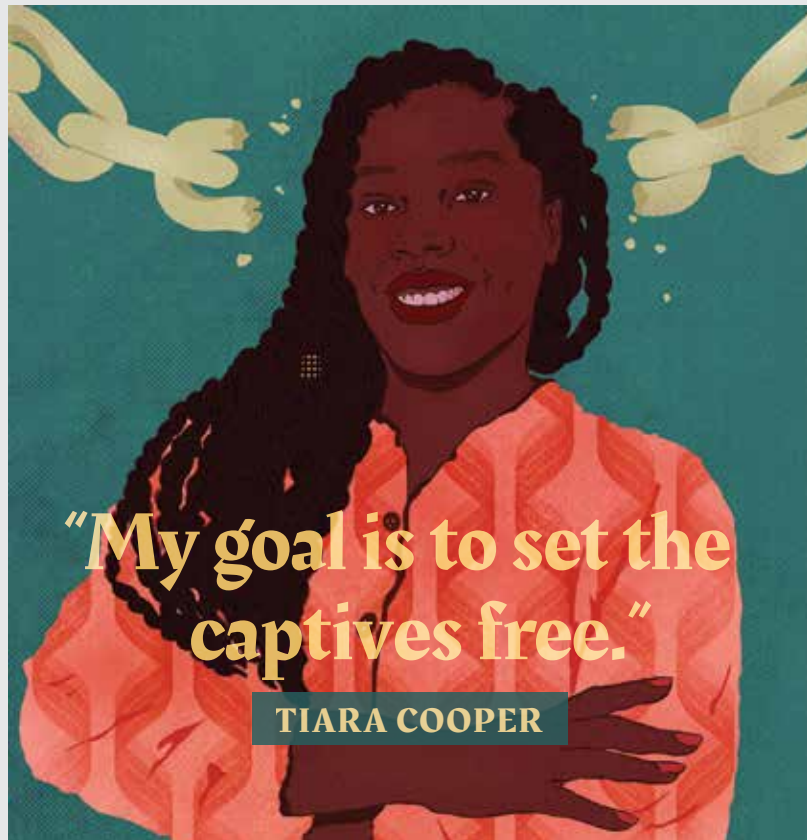
Wylie-Kellermann reflects on the dragon in the New Testament book of Revelation, a frightening beast menacing a woman in labor, ready "to devour her child the moment she gave birth." As I read the essay, another biblical metaphor came to mind, one that is central to the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, a program of religious formation used with young children, especially in Montessori education. At the heart of the catechesis is the story of the Good Shepherd, who in John's gospel "lays down his life for the sheep." The story doesn't start with the wolf, but with the steadfast love of the Shepherd. From that firm foundation, the wolf—and the dragons that beset us—can be faced and, with God's grace, vanquished. May it be so.

RESPONSE

Bridging the Gap

In "Breaking Free of Fear" (January 2022), Katie O'Dunne shares her experience navigating treatment for obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and her faith in God. Her message encouraging faith leaders to support congregants struggling with mental health resonated with Rev. William Kruse: "I have tried to bridge the gap between behavioral health and faith for several decades. It is painstakingly slow but there is progress." Valerie Andrews applauded O'Dunne's writing: "As a Christian living with OCD, Katie's insight and transparency into such a shameful, stigmatized illness deserves a hallelujah Lord! OCD is 'in the pews,' and many of our pulpits." Raelyn Tsarnas was grateful someone passed along the article: "What excellent and thoughtful words—truly inspirational and life-changing."

Write us: response@sojo.net



"IN EMBRACING THE WORLD, WE SHALL BE EMBRACING GOD."

Leonardo Boff
Brazilian theologian

CONTRIBUTING



Julien James

"Visual language is really powerful," says Miami-based freelance photographer Julien James (p. 30). "Joy looks like joy" in both Brooklyn and Tokyo. His portraits are "the end result" of conversations grounded in empathy and connection, a process he hopes allows his subjects to "feel recognized and seen and represented in an honest and authentic way." When he isn't behind the camera, James, a "proud papa," enjoys spending time with his wife and son.



Rebecca Riley

Impromptu history lessons, intentional travel, and movie nights followed by discussions were part of what Rebecca Riley (p. 35) calls her "parents' educational curriculum" for their children "to become people who were open to the world." Riley, a filmmaker and freelance writer, hopes to expose readers to new artists and media while integrating her perspective as a Black woman living in America, highlighting "some commonalities in Black experience" while emphasizing that "we're not a monolith."

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1975

Year the term "global warming" first appeared in a scientific article

55%

Teachers surveyed in 2019 who did not teach or discuss climate change in the classroom

15

Age of Greta Thunberg when she began her "school strike for climate" outside the Swedish Parliament

OUR MISSION

The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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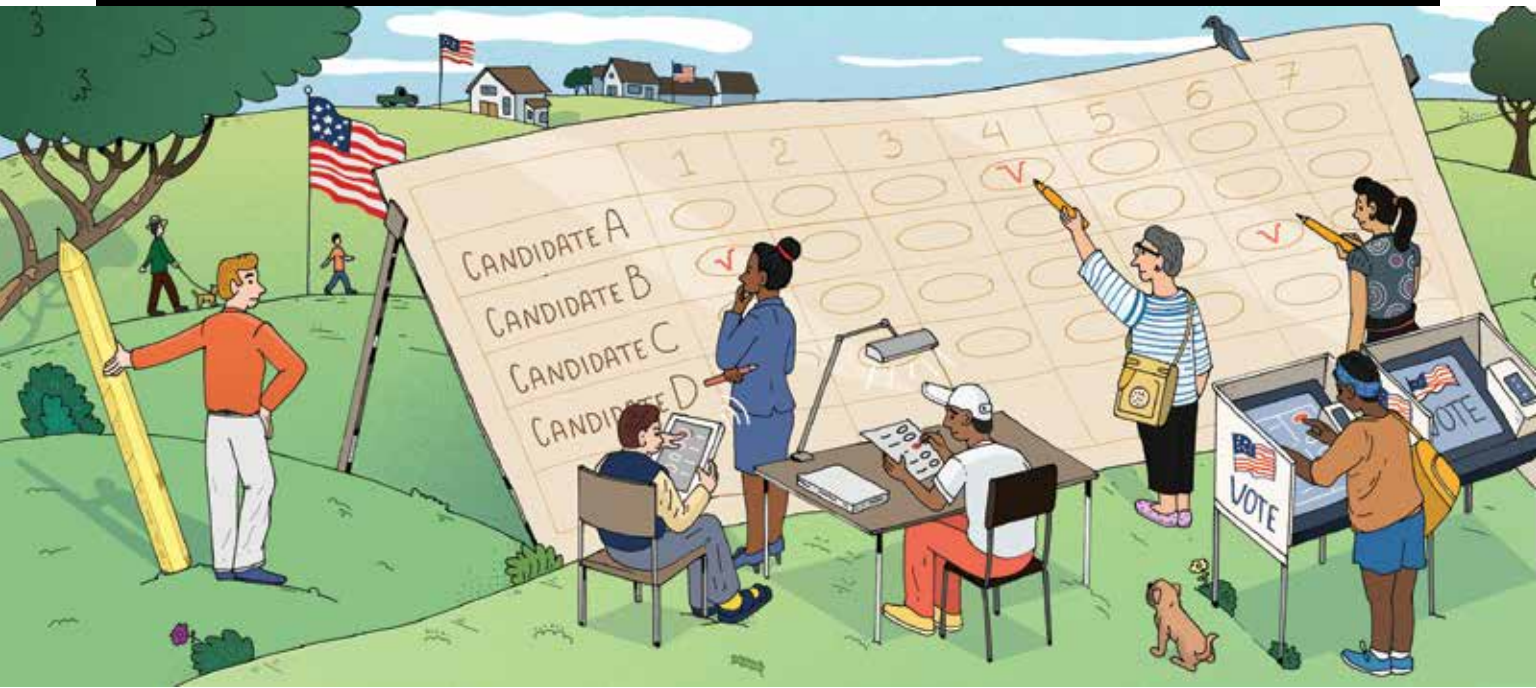
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1

MOBILIZING HOPE

BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR

A STEP AWAY FROM EXTREMISM

The midterm election season is already underway, with a great deal at stake. In the face of the rush of political ads, phone calls, debates, and more, I'm reminded of the Apostle Paul's timeless words that the "fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). These fruits, or virtues, don't easily translate into the messiness of politics, but they are desperately needed today. Sadly, our electoral system increasingly rewards and perpetuates antithetical "fruits"—such as contempt, vitriol, hate for the "other side," and fear. The root causes include media echo chambers, gerrymandered districts, disinformation promulgated on social media, and partisan primaries—the negative aspects of which receive precious little attention. Until we change the

**UNTIL WE CHANGE
THE PERVERTED
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ACRIMONY AND
STALEMATE.**

“PARTISAN PRIMARIES REWARD INCENDIARY RHETORIC AND FEED POLARIZATION.”

perverted incentives that have become hardwired into our electoral system, our politics will remain stuck in a vicious cycle of acrimony and stalemate.

A March 2021 report from Unite America—an organization working to enact electoral reforms that it argues would disincentivize ideologically extreme candidates—reveals that despite record turnout in the 2020 general election, 83 percent of congressional seats were decided by a mere 10 percent of eligible voters. This is because as many as 361 of 435 congressional districts contain such a disproportionate number of *either* Republicans or Democrats that the outcome of general elections is never in doubt—making low-turnout partisan primaries the true contests to determine those seats. There is some evidence that partisan primaries in “safe” Republican or Democratic districts tend to attract the most ideologically extreme voters, which in turn rewards the most ideologically extreme candidates. This dynamic feeds on itself, making Congress more polarized by giving members

fewer incentives to work across the aisle. This process rewards incendiary rhetoric that appeals to the most extreme voters, contributing to the ever-worsening toxic polarization in our culture and beyond.

Two promising reforms provide vital antidotes: nonpartisan primaries and ranked choice voting for general elections. A nonpartisan primary means all candidates seeking a particular office, regardless of party, are on the same ballot in the primary, and the top two (or the top four) vote-getters advance to the general election. Ranked choice voting allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, which makes it less likely that a candidate most voters abhor will win.

This year, Alaska will become the first state to use both a nonpartisan primary system and ranked choice general election voting. The hope is that these two tools will give voters much more choice and control over who represents them and that over time this will reduce toxic polarization among both politicians and voters. Now is the time to pass these reforms in more states and localities to encourage elected officials to embody the types of fruits that will advance the common good, foster healing, and enable all to thrive. ♦



Adam Russell Taylor is president of Sojourners.

In an age of intolerance,
compassion can be dangerous.



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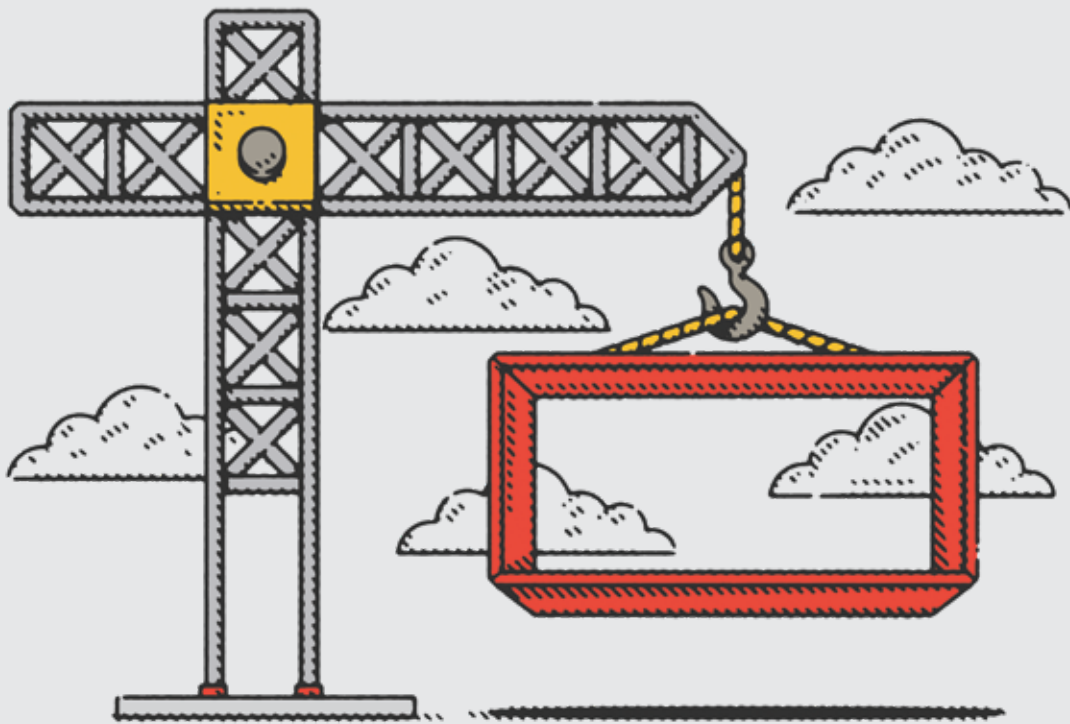
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JOYCE HOLLYDAY served for fifteen years as an editor and feature writer for *Sojourners*, traveling extensively to cover faith-based efforts for justice and peace in the US, war-torn Nicaragua, and apartheid-era South Africa. She has been a pastor on death row, an advocate for survivors of domestic violence, and an ally of immigrant women. She is the author of several books, including *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us*.

THE COOPERATIVE WAY TO FIX THE SUPPLY CHAIN

It's time to envision the relationship between church and labor.



2

By now, most of us have been affected by problems with the “supply chain.” It started last year with shelves void of toilet paper, then morphed into a lack of other manufactured goods, including construction materials, cars, and medical equipment.

Other than this being a (sometimes serious) nuisance, why should people of faith take notice? From our perspectives—as a theologian and a developer of worker-owned cooperatives—the broken supply chain throws light on some of our deepest economic and political problems.

The current shortage of goods and services is often attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its roots, however, are in an economic system designed to produce maximum profits for the few rather than the many by outsourcing production. The “few” are called shareholders and the “many” are those who work for a living. While many working people also own some shares, the bulk of profit in this system goes to those with the largest portfolios and majority positions. No wonder U.S. billionaires have gained more than \$2 trillion since the pandemic began.

Faith communities and worker cooperatives can be a match made in heaven. Each one revitalizes and deepens shared concerns and values of the other. Our Abrahamic religious traditions as well as changes in the world of labor are shaping deeper forms of solidarity, pushing faith communities to see themselves as not

**FAITH COMMUNITIES AND WORKER
COOPERATIVES CAN BE A MATCH
MADE IN HEAVEN.**

Disrupted supply chains are a preview of the collapse of the neoliberal capitalist “global economy.” Reenvisioning the relationship between church and labor—especially around worker cooperatives—could impact supply chains in a different way: There would be no reason to circle the globe in search of ever-cheaper labor and resources in a race to the bottom. In the process, new visions of faith and the divine, as well as new embodiments of community, politics, and the economy emerge. The result is not only shorter supply lines but deeper relationships for deep solidarity. ✦

Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger is co-director of the Southeast Center for Cooperative Development in Nashville, Tenn. **Joerg Rieger** is distinguished professor of theology and founding director of the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt University.

SOJOURNERS

COMMENTARY

BY MARK L. MACDONALD



THE DOORWAY TO LIFE

There is no livable future without a spiritual revolution rooted in repentance.

Repentance, says rabbinic teaching, is one of seven things that preceded the creation of the universe. Without it, Creation could not survive. In our own time, we will witness the truth of this teaching in painful clarity.

The crisis of climate disruption is directly and intimately related to an unsustainable exploitation of Creation's resources and the ecospheres that create those resources. By design, this exploitation only benefits a few, a few mostly shielded from the consequences of this obscene theft. The great mass of humanity is *not* shielded. People living in poverty, racialized minorities, and Indigenous peoples—those least responsible for this planetary breakdown—are the primary targets of climate injustice.

For some, it seems adequate to simply adjust their disposal of some of the waste and by-products of exploitive consumption. This has recently taken on an air of piety. Others look forward to technological and economic solutions that promise that the wealthy few can consume their way out of trouble.

While there will be many aspects to a livable future, the most critical is the one also most ignored. There is no livable future without a spiritual revolution that will have its essence in repentance. Though repentance is an increasingly small part of contemporary Christian conversation, it will be the framework of the livable future that economic, political, and technological solutions find elusive.

Last summer, I attended a wake in an Indigenous community in rural British Columbia. We gathered in an area besieged by relentless misery. This community holds generations of trauma delivered by a culture that openly announced its plan to eliminate them from the land and dismantle their culture, clan, and families. When I arrived, the members had recently learned of the discovery of the remains of 215 children who lost their lives in a genocidal system that had no interest in documenting their lives. This happened in a residential school in a nearby town. Later in the summer, the same people in this area suffered severe and unusual heat, wildfires, and, in the autumn, devastating floods. Though the brutal weather is undoubtedly related to climate injustice, a larger crime is the built-in vulnerability resulting from the systemic poverty necessary to produce extreme wealth for the few.

At the communal wake, a very sad gathering had a moment of hope that tied the faith of the elders with the living hope of a world that is coming into our midst now. An elder rose and prayed in her own language, praying in the name and life of Jesus. She, in the weakness of her age and its fill of suffering, was a voice of past, present, and future spiritual power and its love.

In her faith and courage, we saw a path to the future—if only we would let it disciple us. Another world system is making every effort to disciple us into death. We must choose the repentance that is Creation's life and foundation, the repentance that is the doorway to life. ❖

Mark L. MacDonald is the National Indigenous Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Canada.

T

The religious faith of LGBTQIA+ people remains, in religion reporting, a puzzlement.

For those of us in the LGBTQIA+ family who were raised in religious—especially Christian—households, our churches have often demanded that we choose between our faith communities and our identities. Until recently, genuine LGBTQIA+ role models of faith were markedly rare. Too often, especially in evangelical communities, so-called role models were promoted because they publicly *renounced* their sexuality or identity in exchange for “faithful” pursuit of celibacy and gender conformity. Many of us can recount horror stories of religious trauma by those who rejected and condemned our essential selves. It’s not surprising that many of us run from religions dedicated to instilling self-hatred in us.

Yet a survey of LGBT adults in the United States shows they maintain relationships with faith and spirituality at rates similar to all Americans. Twenty percent of LGBT adults in the U.S. (compared to 25 percent of all Americans) say they attend religious services at least once a week, and 47 percent consider themselves religious. (Among all Americans, 41 percent say religion is “very important” in their lives.) If LGBTQIA+ people are engaged with their faith at similar rates to other Americans, why aren’t they centered as positive examples in religion reporting? Last December, Julia Métraux at the Poynter Institute reported on a lack of coverage in religion reporting on LGBTQIA+ communities and on the importance of queer reporters and editors in centering those stories.

Large majorities in major religious groups in the U.S. favor laws that protect LGBTQIA+ people, and majorities of every major religious group (except white evangelical Protestants) support marriage equality. But 66 percent of coverage on the

WILL RELIGION REPORTING COME OUT?



intersection of LGBTQIA+ identity and religious faith cite religiously identified sources that *oppose* our equality or existence, according to the Center for American Progress.

Of course, LGBTQIA+ people of faith are not monolithic. Some of us maintain relationships with our churches or faiths of origin even as they condemn us. Some of us weave a tapestry of personal and communal spiritualities that reflect a multitude of faiths and experiences. Some of us seek something resembling “organized religion” with caution and intention, participating in affirming and celebratory spaces where our relationships and identities are respected. And many of us, after years or decades of discernment and prayer, find our healing and wholeness incompatible with anything resembling the churches where we were broken.

Capturing our varied experiences and practices with religious faith and participation in contrast to cisgender and straight Americans may seem inconsequential to religion reporters. Recounting the horrors of conversion therapy or headlining major “firsts” in trans and nonbinary ordination or same-gender marriage recognition are easier to distill and present, but a significant portion of our stories (if not the majority) are far more winding and interwoven.

We are startlingly resilient—crafting faith from ashes and reclaiming holy texts that have been unjustly beaten into swords against us. As church leaders wring their hands over the decline of American Protestantism, LGBTQIA+ people of faith set our attention to curating what sustains us.

Until religion reporting captures the nuances of our queer need for both survival and spirituality, until it challenges the persistent neglect and rejection of our gifts in congregations and denominations, we will continue to be reported on primarily in the tales of our trauma or in forgotten footnotes. ✕

**WE ARE
STARTLINGLY
RESILIENT—
CRAFTING FAITH
FROM ASHES.**

Emmy Kegler is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, co-leader of the Queer Grace Community, founding editor of the Queer Grace Encyclopedia, and author of *One Coin Found* and *All Who Are Weary*.

THE HUNGRY SPIRIT

BY ROSE MARIE BERGER

SHIPWRECKED IN AMERICA: A LENTEN MEDITATION



The rough voice of the aging priest is muffled as he bends forward to touch his head to the marble altar. Face down is better than face out, he thinks, where his failure is on full display.

The near-empty church extends into shadow. A handful of worshippers avoid close contact. They grip the wooden pews with desperation, the half-drowned scrambling for a gunwale. “The hulk of the shipwreck behind them,” as the poet says. Their children won’t come to church, the hypocrisy too much to bear. He knows the saints in high niches are no match for the idols in their children’s pockets, provide no relief from their hollowed-out fatigue. He glances up. I am the captain of this ship, he thinks, and we are going down. The bread sits lifeless in the paten. The wine a flatline. Instead of Christ at the Last Supper, the priest recalls Odysseus clinging to the fig tree while the sea greedily sucks down his ship and men. Is that what you get for rustling the gods’ cattle, he wonders.

He clears his throat. Listens to the deep-chested coughs squeezing the breath out of his people. Almost in tune, he begins to sing: “Create in me a clean heart, oh God; let me be like you in all my ways. Give me your strength, teach me your song, shelter me in the shadow of your wings.” He looks out, expecting to see the same shipwrecked bodies. “Like sea-crows they were borne on the waves about the black ship,” Homer wrote, “and the god took from them their returning.” Instead, he meets gazes filled with kindred affection. His chest feels warm. The quiet in the church seems less like emptiness. In staggered response, the survivors carry the next lines of the tune: “For we are your righteousness. If we die to ourselves and live through your death, then we shall be born again to be blessed in your love.” A baby squeals from the back row beyond his sight, much louder than the sound system has ever worked.

3

He reaches for paten and chalice. Their cold metal not meeting the moment. A better priest, he thinks, would have his mind on the apostle Paul during Mass, not Odysseus. Paul had not been the captain of his ship; he’d been a prisoner under guard. Lifting up the bread and wine, he remembers scraps from the story in Acts. Just before dawn, knowing their ship would soon be dashed upon the rocks, Paul urged his captors to eat. “For the last 14 days,” Paul said, “you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven’t eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive.”

The priest takes some bread and gives thanks to God in front of them all. He breaks it into pieces and begins to eat. Then he opens his arms, inviting these lovely few to also eat. “They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves,” says the storyteller in Acts. Odysseus, the priest recalls, clung to that fig tree “like a bat.” Its branches too high to climb and its roots too dangerously close to the sea’s teeth. “I clung there steadfastly,” Odysseus said, “until the sea should vomit forth mast and keel again, and to my joy they came at length.”

Here is my heart, O God. Let me be like you in all my ways. ✱

Rose Marie Berger, author of *Bending the Arch: Poems*, is a senior editor of *Sojourners* magazine.



BURIED TREASURES

There was a time—and I remember it well—when very few faith traditions took the environmental crisis seriously. Since I’m a Christian, I knew the reaction within my community firsthand: Liberal churches thought that ecology was something we would get to once we dealt with war and poverty; conservative churches thought anything environmental was a way station on the road to paganism.

This has changed—more decisively in mainline churches than evangelical ones, perhaps, but across the board there is now robust scholarship on the biblical roots of creation care. And this same revolution has taken place across other traditions too—in no small part thanks to Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. Working at Harvard in the 1990s, they assembled a series of landmark conferences for theologians of different backgrounds. One weekend would be devoted to Jains finding the green roots of their religion; a few weeks later, Hindus or Sikhs or Confucians or Muslims would assemble. By the time this Harvard series finished, it was clear that every major faith had resources buried in their scriptures and commentaries—treasures that perhaps no one had noticed till the growing climate crisis demanded that they be found.

Now, this remarkable history is going online where anyone can see it—Tucker, now at Yale Divinity School, is coordinating a massive open online course (a MOOC, as they’re affectionately known) devoted to “Religions and

Ecology: Restoring the Earth Community.” “We hope that learners will see the world’s religions as reservoirs of wisdom that can inspire transformative ideas and practices for the well-being of the Earth community,” said Tucker. “Religions add moral depth to concerns for environmental justice—‘the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor’—which makes them vital for responding to the climate emergency.”

My hope is that people take time to watch at least some of this free course, because I’ve seen how these theologies translated directly into action. It was Bartholomew, patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, who took his understanding of the sacredness of the Earth and turned it into crucial advocacy for the rivers of Europe and around the world; it’s groups like Dayenu that take the Hebrew Bible’s calls for stewardship and translate them into demands that our financial system stop funding fossil fuels. And, of course, it’s Indigenous spiritual traditions, also covered in this course, that provide the backdrop for so much activism to protect places and people from pipelines and pollution.

None of this should come as a surprise—what conception of God could divorce Creator from creation? But the point is, it *was* a surprise. Until people looked, searchingly, they understood the chief dramas on our earth as the conflicts between people and the conflicts within each of us. But now we add to those an understanding that our conflict with the physical world around us may be the most consequential of all.

It’s all a reminder that our great traditions are time capsules, full of ideas we won’t fully understand until we actually need them. And that should be a comfort. ♦

**WHAT CONCEPTION
OF GOD COULD
DIVORCE CREATOR
FROM CREATION?**

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, is the author most recently of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*

EYEWITNESS

4

**"WE ARE ALWAYS
TRYING TO CREATE
JOY INSIDE THE CAMP."**



Residents watch a fire spread through the Balukhali Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh.
March 2021 photograph by Mainul Islam

March 2022

THE WORLD DOES NOT KNOW

I started taking photos because I want to tell the stories of our Rohingya people's struggle.

I was born in 1994 in a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. I have been living in the camp for about 28 years. [It] is known to the government of Bangladesh as the Registrar Refugee Camp. The Bangladesh government has police, Ansar members, and an executive magistrate to control the camp. There are various NGOs, but we are not getting any good service from them. I don't think of it as a camp. This is a detention center. Educational institutions have been closed for four years. We are not getting the basic rights that a human being needs to survive. The rejection of citizenship rights for Rohingya, denial of freedom of movement, eviction campaigns, violence against women, forced labor, expulsion from their lands and property, violence and torture have made Myanmar's ethnic Rohingya the most persecuted minority in the world.

There is a barbed wire fence around the Rohingya camp. That's why we are always trying to create joy inside the camp with sports, festivals, and weddings. We are playing football, volleyball, cricket, chinlone, etc. There are mosques and madrasas in the Rohingya refugee camps, and they go there to practice their faith.

We are trying to do many things to survive, like voluntary jobs, opening small shops, doing handicrafts ... but in every area, we face restrictions. The world does not know what is really happening in Rohingya refugee camps. They know some bad things, but they do not understand genocide. Refugees are everywhere in this world. So why this little understanding? ❖

Mainul Islam, a freelance photographer specializing in street photography, lives in a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. This interview was conducted by Sojourners' Jenna Barnett in December and January via WhatsApp.



DANCING IN THE DRAGON'S JAW

BY LYDIA
WYLIE-KELLMANN



CLIMATE CATASTROPHE IS UPON US. How do we raise our children for joy?



ILLUSTRATIONS BY
JIANAN LIU



“Mommy, why don’t people care about the trees?”

I lay on the floor feeling the weight in my chest. I can hear a constellation of starlings gathering in the silver maple out my window. Every breath takes work to keep the airways open against the anxiety that has grasped my body. My youngest’s question was haunting me.

How on earth are we supposed to parent in this moment? Climate catastrophe is upon us. We will know its touch, if we haven’t already, and our children will certainly know it. How do we keep grounded as we move from one crisis to the next?

I reach for a cassette labeled “Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann workshop, 1991.” I blow off the dust and stick it in the tape player. Out comes a voice that was once as common as daily bread: my mother’s voice. Sixteen years after her death, I hear her, clear and steady.

She reads Revelation 12: “A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, with 12 stars on her head for a crown. She was pregnant and in labor, crying out in pain as she was about to give birth.” I listen as my belly, still etched with the stretch marks from when my own body groaned with creation, rises off the floor. “The dragon stood before the woman about to deliver, to devour her child the moment she gave birth.”

I keep breathing; yes, I know this old dragon. And I cry out with this woman and hunger for her company.

In a 1991 article for *The Witness* magazine, my mom further explicated this woman giving birth in the face of the dragon: “She is classically understood (by the Catholics at any rate) to be an image of Mary the mother of God. But she is powerful and honored by God. She has dominion. All this while she is in labor, surrendering to the onslaught of life that will come, assent or no. And this woman takes this role even though, at her feet, there waits a dragon whose reason for being is to devour her child.”

Today, in my city of Detroit, Jeanie’s exegesis remains piercing. “The dragon” now disguises itself as the spirit of a “comeback city,” while at the same time turning off water service to homes and threatening privatization. The dragon uses the Marathon oil refinery 4 miles from our home to poison the air. The dragon lives in children’s asthma-swollen lungs and pours raw sewage from combined sewer systems into basements and the river when the rain falls hard. The dragon of environmental racism knows no bounds.

My own babies, Isaac and Cedar, are now 8 and 5. They climb the same trees I did as a kid in southwest Detroit. This is Anishinaabe land named Waawiyatanong (“where the water goes round”).

Parenting in these days requires educating our children about this dragon. We cannot hide the dragon. They too will have to look it in the eye. How do we help them be ready?

Engaging climate change with our kids can feel insurmountable. We know their beautiful minds will have endless and powerful questions and yet we have no answers. What is going to happen? I don’t know. How do we fix it? I don’t know. Will we be okay? I don’t know. It’s a parental tendency to not tell our kids about a thing until we know *how* we want to say it and have some answers at hand—especially when it is a moment of life or death. But, in the case of climate change, we just can’t do it that way.

My partner and I held these uncertainties as we discerned and yearned for kids of our own. We understood that parenting in this era meant dealing with the climate crisis. We are required to entrust what we most love to the unknown future. Our kids are not a reason to flee the danger, but to face it. They have forced us to be even more intentional about how we think about money, time, and technology. We make commitments around growing food and sharing resources with our neighbors. We try to make do with one car and a handful of bikes. We have deepened our roots on this street where I was raised—and they are raised—by prioritizing community. We cannot and will not shield them from injustice in the world around them.

We welcome children into a vulnerable space of fear and uncertainty. And that is a beautiful thing. Trust these hallowed spaces of unknowing to be fertile ground for our kids’ imaginations and for all our hearts to grow.

FALL IN LOVE WITH
YOUR PLACE

Perhaps the most urgent work that we can do is to teach our children to learn the sacred ecosystem where God’s secrets are tucked away, where their own bodies grow and dwell. To paraphrase Baba Dioum, a Senegalese environmentalist, “You can’t save a place you don’t love. You can’t love a place you don’t know. And you can’t know a place you haven’t learned.”

My kids often notice what I miss. This means we lie down on the dirt with them and watch the leaves of the milkweed disappear as the caterpillar grows fat. Or we run outside after bedtime to watch the snow



Children have a way of recalibrating our clocks to kairos time.

fall under the moon, catching those early snowflakes on our tongues.

They invite me into holy awe and gratitude, releasing my grasp on the clocks of capitalism and the glorification of screens. Responsibilities and schedules are undeniable, but finding ways to let them go now and then allows our children to shift their posture, and even our own, toward an intimacy with the earth. Children have a way of recalibrating our clocks to kairos time.

We put boundaries on Zoom calls and screen time, not just for our kids, but for ourselves as well. We make time to walk slowly through the woods, nibbling on wild grape vines, clover flowers, and wild carrot. As my kids climb over logs or encounter the hiding salamander, their souls seem at rest. They are falling in love.

CALLING KIN BY NAME

In *Genesis*, God invites humans into the intimate work of calling creatures by name. In our backyard, my kids are quick to cry out in delight: “tufted titmouse,” “chickadee,” or “red-tailed hawk.”

Naming, language, being, and relationship are interconnected parts of our ancient story. As these creatures disappear, our vocabulary does too. Over the past 15 years, tech words have replaced nature words in children’s dictionaries. “Broadband,” “block graph,” and “cut and paste” have pushed out “acorn,” “willow,” and “dandelion.” In 2007, the Oxford Junior Dictionary removed more than 50 nature words and another 50 in 2012. *The Lost Words*, a children’s book written by Robert Macfarlane and illustrated by Jackie Morris, is a beautiful collection of creature illustrations and poetry written in response to the grief of how children’s language is changing. How will our children notice the red-winged black birds disappearing if they don’t know what they are called?

So, we learn their names. We let our bird identification book become tattered and stained. We pause to figure out if the tree is a red oak or a white oak.

Learning the names of plants and creatures becomes an act of resistance to the all-consuming dragon. These names fall from our tongues as a ritual of remembrance. As Christians, we know the power of communal naming and remembering that we find in the sanctuary each week. We say the words again and again, generation to generation. May we add the sacred names of honeybee and trillium into our collective liturgies so that if they begin to go silent, we will notice.

THE WORK OF OUR BODIES AND HANDS

This summer, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres noted that the most recent intergovernmental climate change report was “a code red for humanity. ... Global heating is affecting every region on Earth, with many of the changes becoming irreversible.”

The U.S. infrastructure is crumbling under the weight of extreme weather. My kids have already witnessed trucks and cars submerged under 9 feet of water on the freeway near us. They have watched scuba divers search for bodies. How will they cope when the water is higher? How will



Slowly we entrust our children to be held, not by us, but by all of creation.

children stay cool in 120-degree weather? What will they eat when the supply chain collapses?

And how will they find joy? When the electrical, plumbing, and cell phone grids collapsed under the floods last summer, our whole neighborhood brought grills to the front lawn and feasted on the thaw from our freezers. Amid anxiety, we found a way to create a festival.

We usher our kids into a schooling system designed not for climate resilience but for industrialization. They are prepped for factories or desk jobs by listening to bells and learning obedience. This old way won't serve them as the climate grows more unpredictable. Education for this moment requires that we relearn what our bodies have forgotten. My kids are learning to pick up knitting needles and work a sewing machine. We are putting seeds in the earth and raising chickens. We chop firewood, shovel compost, and make jam. There are adults in their lives who know how to do plumbing, electrical, and construction, and friends who play piano, throw pottery, gather medicinal herbs, and tend beehives.

Little by little, we expand our community. We find our way back into work that is gentler on the earth. Slowly we entrust our children to be held, not by us, but by all of creation.

BURY THE DEAD

So much of our children's future with climate change is unpredictable, but one thing is certain. They will face death ... of species, of ecosystems, and of human beings. I want my children to be able to touch death. To look it in the eye. To honor the dead. To cry and give thanks and return bodies to the earth.

So, we throw a lot of funerals. We have buried every pet fish, a couple of pet rabbits, and a host of stray cats. We dig a hole together. We tell stories. We touch the bodies. We offer prayers. And we sing. There is a lot of singing. It is holy time.

This year when the Día de los Muertos altar was built at our kids' school, Isaac brought a drawing of his Grandma Jeanie. They never met in the flesh, but he feels her kindred spirit as he too delights in endless hours playing in snow and wave-jumping in the Great Lakes. He wrote on his drawing "My Grandma Jeanie died 16 years ago from brain cancer. She loved it outside. I hope you are happy."

Cedar too remembered her when we lit our communal Samhain fire, the Gaelic festival honoring the harvest time when the veil between the living and the dead is thin. He reached for a handful of wood shavings and threw them into the fire as he called her name. Handful after handful, the fire burst and popped as he called soup-kitchen guests, grandparents, and beloved chickens into the circle.

When my children are faced with death, I want them to remember these rituals in their bones. I want songs and prayers to tumble out of their mouths.

PUBLIC WITNESS AND STREET RESISTANCE

On the days when my own fear gets the better of me, I find my way into the streets. Protests are one of those places where we reach out for another's hand and realize we aren't alone.

The dragon is circling. While on one hand we keep birthing new life and new dreams, on the other, we show up to resist the dragon. There is not one power or principality responsible for the climate collapse, but a tangled web of energy, technology, and agricultural industries, global corporations, capitalism, nationalism, white supremacy, and dare we also name some versions of Christianity. It is powerful enough to make us collapse with despair. But we bring our bodies and show up. We name and expose. We resist because we cannot do otherwise. In the words of Catholic priest Daniel Berrigan, "Don't just *do* something, stand there."

When anger and grief pour out on the street, it becomes church. Holy rage held with many voices in the public square gives way to hope. Collectively, we can hold back the dragon.

So, we bring the kids along. We pack endless snacks and mittens. With markers and crayons, they create often ridiculous and lovely signs. And we go—even if only for a few minutes. Because I want them to feel the collective creativity and power of community. I want them to release their rage. I want them to learn how to fight like hell for the living.

LET THE CHILDREN LEAD

In 2019, I interviewed 90-year-old Joanna Macy, a scholar of Buddhism and respected voice in the anti-nuclear movements and deep ecology, for *Geez* magazine. "I'm grateful for those who choose mindfully, with clear understanding, to bear children into this time. Because we're going to need those newcomers coming in through the passage of collapsing society, carrying the grief, and moving forward into a life-sustaining culture that can be born of this," she said.

How true that is. One Swedish student, Greta Thunberg, strikes from school on Fridays to demand action on climate change and fans a worldwide movement. Six young people from Portugal have taken 33 countries to the European Human Rights Court for failing to do their part in stopping the effects of climate change. Two young women in Australia rappelled from huge coal-handling machinery to shut down the largest coal shipping port in the world.

A new generation is leading the way. The responsibility is not and should not be on young people alone. But thank God for their imagination, their clarity, and their sense of urgency. Our job is to become listeners to the young people on the front lines, and to the little ones in our arms in the dark of night who ask, “Why don’t people care about the trees?”

SOMETHING WAITING TO BE BORN

When I was 5 years old, my mom wrote: “The dragon is real. We can feel his breath. We know the dragon’s cruelty and voracious hunger in the movements of imperial power and in the personal cold anger and hatred. And within us is something waiting to be born, something God-given and sacred. Something small and frail and dependent on us for its very blood and growth.”

I look now at Cedar, my own 5-year-old, and know the dragon remains. There are days I fear there is no hope left.

And yet we give birth. And yet we witness these children continuing to dream on this sweet Earth. I never doubt for a second the power and mystery of labor in our collective bodies. The work, the time, the life before us is beautiful, and we can fill it with love and joy even amid collapse.

As 8-year-old Isaac said, “I hope for so many things, but it will be hard. I want all the animals to be safe. I want everybody, including animals, to live a happy life enjoying their life. Living with no pollution. Living free.”

This is how we defeat the dragon. Revelation 12:14 says when the woman resisted the dragon, she was “given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place ... out of the serpent’s reach.” She protected the child—the child who leads to freedom. ❖

Lydia Wylie-Kellermann is editor of *Geez* magazine and *The Sandbox Revolution: Raising Kids for a Just World* (Broadleaf, 2021). She lives in Detroit.



A PRAYER FOR OUR CHILDREN IN THE GREAT TURNING

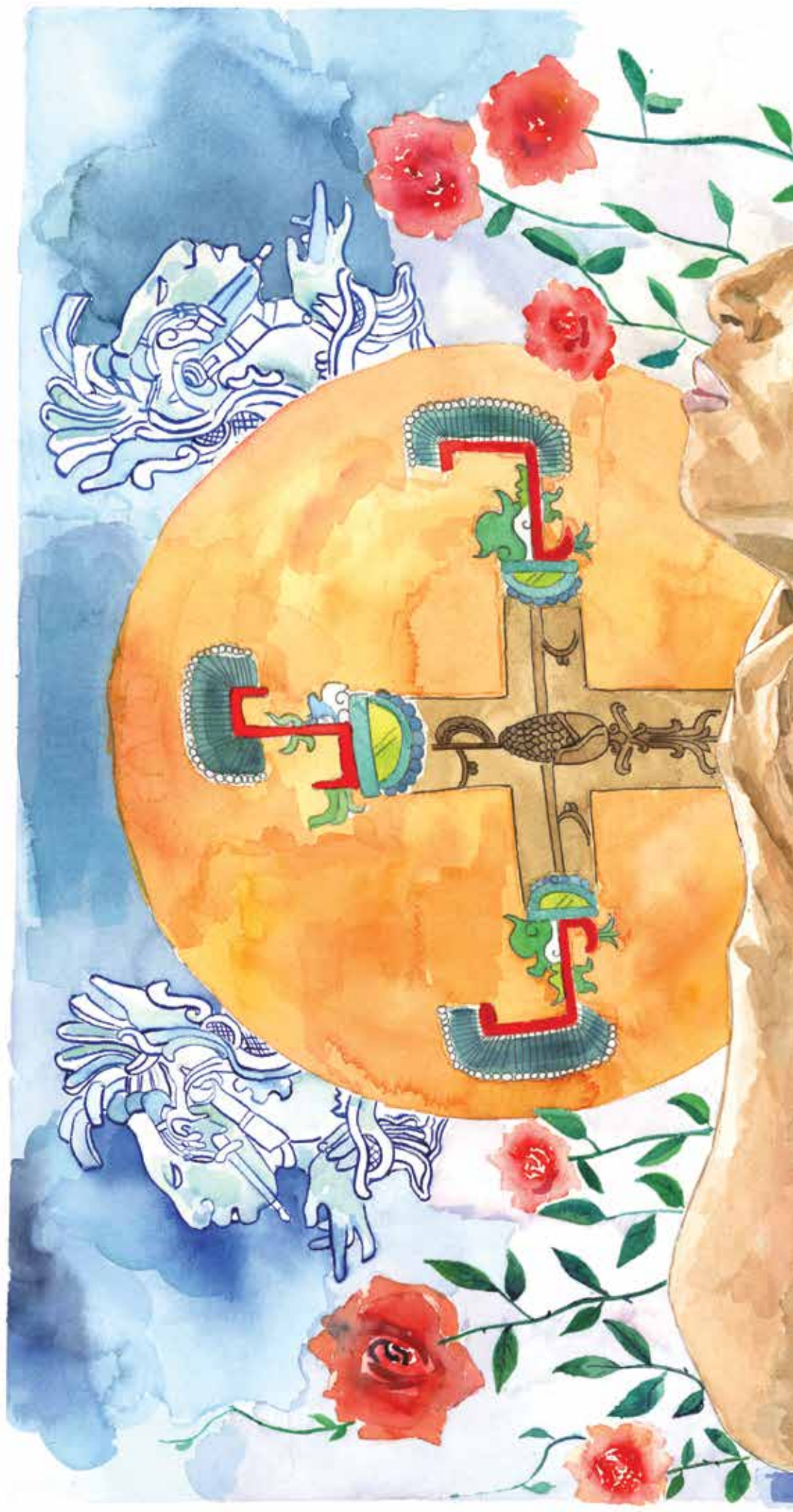
BY LYDIA WYLIE-KELLERMANN

My beloved children,
who were knit in your mother’s womb deep in the depths of the earth,
You too were called by name along with the cedar tree, the red-bellied woodpecker,
and the black bear.

May you lie under a sky full of stars and feel yourself entirely rearranged.
May you return home to the same tree year after year
knowing the smell of the leaves each changing season.

Join your sacred groan to that of creation. May it never cease.
Trust your body. Let it guide you. And one day let it return to the soil as food.
Let your life be an answer to the earth’s prayers.

THE MAYA REMEMBER





On Mexico's Yucatán peninsula, the legacy of the ancestors reaches into the present.

By Lars Åkerson

Illustration by
José Flores

When Maya community educator Wilma Esquivel Pat opened a recent forum on the autonomy of Indigenous peoples, her remarks recalled her people's struggle for self-determination in the Caste War of Yucatán—175 years ago.

European descendants had built lucrative sugar cane and henequen plantations on the peninsula that depended on Maya peasant farmers' bonded labor. While the abolition movement was washing across the Americas, landholders on the Yucatán Peninsula began selling Maya prisoners of war and debtors into slavery in Cuba. In 1847, the Maya revolted and established an autonomous government in the eastern part of the peninsula that lasted through the turn of the century.

The era Esquivel Pat brought to mind remains recent, in generational time, for many Maya in attendance at the forum. Elders who held them as children may have themselves been cradled in the arms of elders who participated in that historic struggle. In them, their ancestors' legacy reaches into the present. It's a birthright they recall with pain and pride—the generations who resisted, as well as the white settlers and upper echelons of the colonial caste system who privatized land, exploited labor, and extracted returns at the expense of most of the region's people.

Today, Esquivel Pat is part of a coalition of Indigenous groups organizing against new, yet familiar, threats: fresh waves of settlers and rounds of capital investment in development projects surrounding a high-speed tourism project called the "Maya Train," a name that belies its lack of Indigenous support. Ezer May, a Maya anthropologist, told the Inter Press Service news agency that the train, the first leg of which is scheduled to open in 2023, "is an attempt to transform Indigenous peoples and integrate them into the tourism-based economic model."

**'OUR PEOPLE ARE CREATED
FROM WATER'**

In the region of the Yucatán called the Chenes—a local place name that alludes

to the region's plentiful, subterranean waters—the Maya remember. Their ancestors have long been considered another resource to exploit.

Maya elders teach that land and water are not things that can be owned. Neither are they a "commons," nor *ejido*—terms passed down from English and Spanish feudal law, respectively, to designate resources managed for collective benefit. *Yoók'ol Kab*, the Maya name for land-water, is not property at all.

Representatives of Ka' Kuxtal Much Meyaj—a community-building organization whose name in Maya means "The Revival of our Common Work"—say that for the Maya, land, water, and everything therein are integral members of their social and spiritual world. Even naming these parts of the world as discrete legal entities and rights-holders fails to convey the depth of their interconnection and the robustness of their agency.

Ka' Kuxtal Much Meyaj argues that the integrity of Water—which they choose to capitalize as they do the names of other members of their community—is essential to their own existence as a people. "When we speak of the sacred Water, we're referring to a living being," say representatives of the organization's leadership group, the assembly. The assembly, which guides the organization by consensus, requested that its members not be identified by name, in recognition of the collective nature of their vision and work and because the Indigenous group has seen foreign interests exploit differences and divisions within their communities to gain advantage in territorial struggles. Group members agreed to participate in this article on the condition of a commitment to a decolonial and nonextractive writing process.

One member, an international scholar and soft-spoken polyglot, shrinks at being identified as an "expert" in Maya heritage and cultural memory. They defer to the elders, ancestors, and collective of community leaders who they say continue to teach and inform their study of Maya sacred writings and inscriptions. Yet ev-

idence of the scholar's attentive study is readily apparent, as they cite oral tradition alongside archeological findings from across the peninsula and studies of Maya writings, including fragments smuggled to Europe during the Caste War. "Our people are created from Water. Water gives us life and shapes our understanding of the world."

CONFLICTS WITH DOMINANT CHRISTIANITY

These truths have been passed from generation to generation despite doctrinal opposition from now-dominant Christianity. One member recalls growing up in the Christian church where they were taught "simplistic ideas" in conflict with Maya understandings of the world. For example, they say that while many Christians associate serpents with evil and the Genesis account of the Fall, the animals have a respected place in the Maya world. In one Mayalitururgical text, mythical water serpents appear alongside the deity Cháak and steward the flow of the waters over the earth. While they may not always be safe, snakes are also seen as guardians of the home. Ka' Kuxtal elders tell how traditional Maya households had a place in the storehouse rafters where a snake might take up residence to protect the *kumche'* (granary) from mice and rats. They learned to honor this social order from their own elders but acknowledge that "many Maya communities struggle with this complexity."

These longstanding tensions were among those that brought community elders together a dozen years ago to launch Ka' Kuxtal Much Meyaj. The organization was established in 2010 because its founders saw the old ways fading from community consciousness.

The council of two dozen women and men, representing communities across the Chenes region in the Mexican state of Campeche, first convened to promote seedkeeping and collective reflection on the challenges their communities faced. Since then, the group has continued its commitment to "build, as a Maya people, the necessary educational and organizational conditions for our autonomy and self-determination."

It's a vision they see requiring both inward and outward work. Through festivals, forums, exchanges, workshops, community assemblies, and independent media, they create space for ancestral knowledge to be celebrated, used, and shared within their communities. At the same time, the organization coordinates regional, national,

and international advocacy campaigns to defend the integrity of their multispecies communities.

A COLONIAL PARTNERSHIP OF CHURCH AND STATE

In the Chenes, there are Maya who remember. Their homeland has long been an object of foreign desire—to settle the land and extract its value. For just as long, Maya have resisted these incursions, whether from Europe or the Mexican state.

It was on this peninsula that the colonial endeavor faced an early test of its capacity for internal dissonance. It was here that Bishop Diego de Landa, a Franciscan friar sent from Spain in 1549, led an obsessive crusade against Maya scholarship and religious culture. Landa's devotion to destroying the Maya written record was so complete that his notes about the Mayan script are among the only remaining historical references regarding their written language. The books and codices he found "contained but superstition and lies of the devil," he wrote from Spain, after having been exonerated of overseeing torture in his campaigns. "We burned them all."

For the half century prior to Landa, his compatriot Bishop Bartolomé de las Casas had gained renown for denouncing abuses against Indigenous people and advocating a more pacific approach to evangelism. The Dominican priest opposed coerced confessions of faith and argued that the Indigenous people the Spanish encountered were human and therefore capable of reason and worthy of respect.

During his tenure as Protector of the Indians for the Spanish crown, Las Casas became convinced that enslaving people indigenous to the Americas was unjust and that enslaving Africans was also wrong. His earnest dedication to reforming the colonial apparatus from within ultimately put him at odds with European landholders and precipitated his return to Spain.

Despite their differences, both bishops were welcome in the big-tent partnership of church and state to overthrow "the barbarous nations" and bring them "to the faith." The religious and legal mandate extended in a 1493 declaration by Pope Alexander VI (a papal bull titled "Inter caetera") granted the empire dominion over lands they found not already under Christian rule. The land grant also assigned guardianship over the lands' peoples—all in direct recompense for Spanish and Portuguese faithfulness in expelling Muslims and Jews from the Iberian Peninsula.

BATTLING THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

This mandate, forged in violent antisemitism and Islamophobia and tempered in the paternalistic colonial project through subsequent treaties, became a pillar of the emerging theological and legal theory known as the Doctrine of Discovery. The doctrine continues to disenfranchise Indigenous people of their legal standing—and theological integrity—by imposing foreign laws upon them, depriving them of rights to their territories, and undermining their systems of knowledge and structures of relation.

The legal doctrine entered U.S. law in 1823 when the Supreme Court asserted the government's claim to the rights given by the church to European colonizing powers. In the 200 years since, the decision has been cemented into the bedrock of U.S. property law.

Similar precedent prevails the world over. Lizy Peralta, a lawyer with the Roman Catholic National Indigenous Mission Assistance Center in Mexico City and a panelist in the forum with Esquivel Pat, says the discovery doctrine continues to impose "a notion of theological, political, economic, and social order" that justifies indifference to Indigenous territorial rights in national and international courts.

Yet a growing body of Indigenous legal scholars are working to translate their peoples' ancestral knowledge into judicial frameworks that support their ontological and territorial defense efforts. These critical Indigenous legal theorists aim to amplify voices that have historically been excluded from courts of law. In turn, they hope to establish grounds not merely for natural resource use rights and the legal personhood of rivers or forests within existing legal frameworks, but also for what some call "territorial rights," or rights in relation.

These legal theorists say intervention is necessary because the supremacist discovery doctrine deprives Indigenous peoples of their agency and full self-determination by demanding they comply with legal frameworks built on systems imported by European colonizing powers. These racist frameworks privilege colonial institutions and give little credence to Indigenous judicial and religious systems.

In the Maya world, even the legal notion of "sovereignty"—a cornerstone of many Indigenous claims to self-determination as well as the free, prior, and informed consent granted by international law—is

THE MAYA HOMELAND HAS LONG BEEN AN OBJECT OF FOREIGN DESIRE—TO SETTLE THE LAND AND EXTRACT ITS VALUE.

fraught. On one hand, the Maya want their desires recognized and respected in legal matters concerning their ancestral territory. On the other, representatives of Ka' Kuxtal say their people do not understand themselves as having dominion over *Yoók'ol Kab*—land-water—in the way sovereignty is often understood. They say the people's relationship with their native land is better characterized as one of mutual responsibility.

This perspective is a far cry from the approach the group sees prevailing now on their home peninsula. They say a spike in development projects and an expansion of industrial agriculture are overdrawing and polluting the aquifer that mediates life to Maya communities. They also name the discovery doctrine's influence on intellectual property law and international treaties that have opened the region to genetically modified seed without regard for either the contamination of ancestral corn cultivars or for human health. Studies have linked the engineered seed to the appearance of glyphosate, also known by the trade name Roundup, in tortillas and mothers' milk in the Yucatán Peninsula.

THE MENNONITES ARRIVE

In the Chenes, there are Maya who still remember. They are responsible to *Yoók'ol Kab* and to all who dwell in it.

Chenes is a Spanish rendering of the Mayan word *ch'é'eno'ob*, or “wells.” The Chenes is a region in the central Yucatán Peninsula where water is abundant and wells are bountiful. It is here, in this storied place, amid Maya communities organizing

their revival, that in the past 20 years a new wave of settler-colonists has begun to arrive. This time, they are German-speaking Mennonites in search of religious freedom and arable land, convinced that, by God's providence and their own industry, they will prosper.

But Ka' Kuxtal representatives say some of their new neighbors are responsible for depleting and defiling local groundwater. They are concerned by some of the new settlers' agricultural practices and inattention to the region's delicate ecosystem, which are already harming members of the broader community, including native *Melipona* honeybees.

Without Water, the representatives say, their people will cease to exist. Yet the Ka' Kuxtal assembly resists enmity with the Mennonite colonists. While seeking injunctions against abuse of the aquifer, the Maya group still hopes to build common cause with their new neighbors in what they see as a larger struggle for survival. They say Mennonites have also been poisoned by groundwater contamination and that a shared concern for their families' well-being has opened initial avenues for dialogue. From their own efforts within Maya communities, the assembly has come to value the solidarity built through small, consistent actions done with honesty and transparency—which they have seen emerge in surprising places.

This approach led the assembly to reach out to the Mennonite Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition in 2018 to learn more about Mennonites and begin conversation about the theological and legal roots of their struggle.

While the Mennonite coalition, whose membership is largely North American, shares only the most remote denominational connection with German-speaking Mennonite colonies in Mexico, the outreach effort has grown into a partnership to advance community education and structural change. For the Mennonites involved in this alliance, the Maya invitation—anchored in collective memory, shared struggle, and concrete goals to improve their communities' health and self-determination—has arrived as an extension of grace and an opportunity to grow in restorative solidarity.

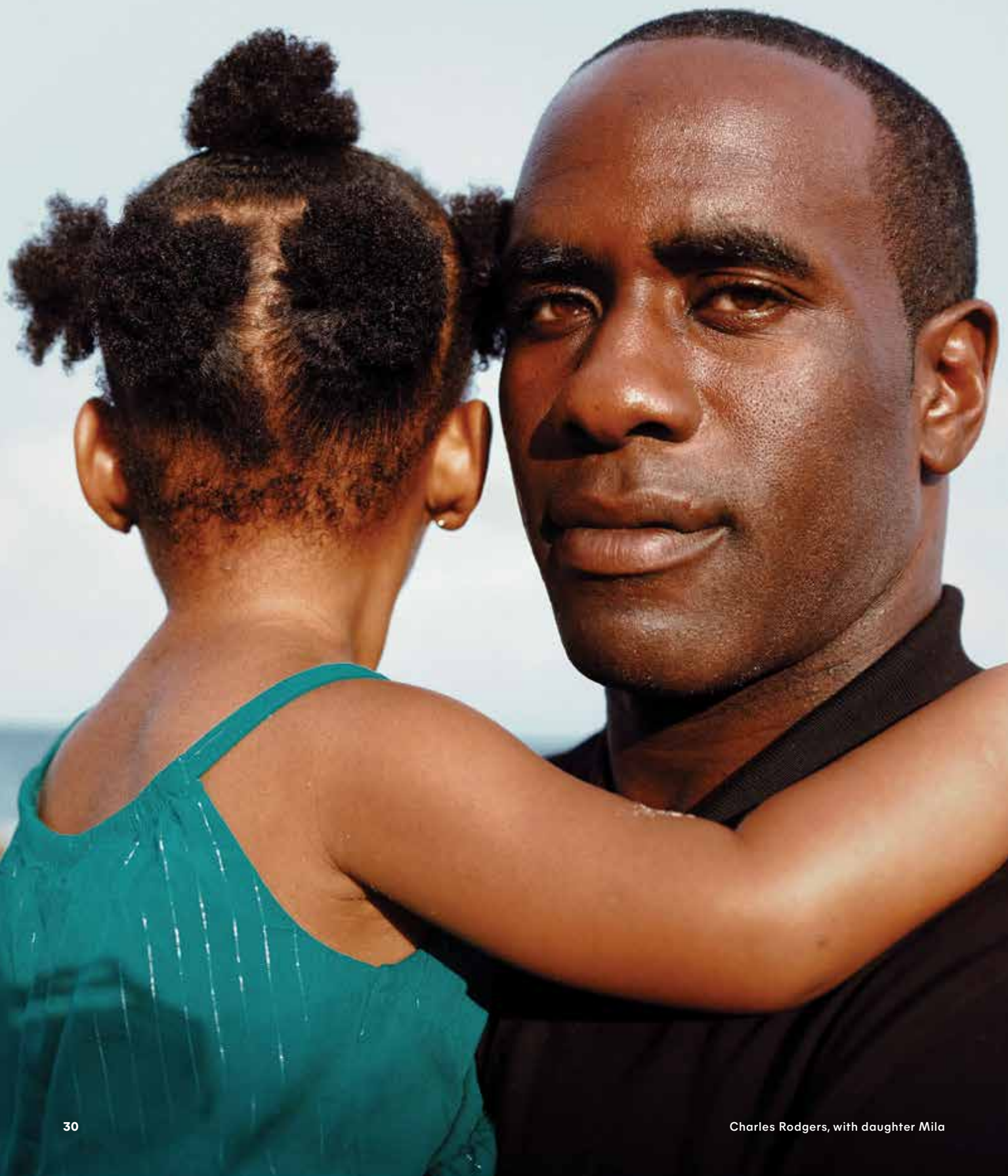
Despite their reputation as a Christian peace tradition, European Mennonites, like many white people, have tended to dwell on narratives of their own innocence and God's providence at the expense of reckoning with the histories of harms in which they are implicated. Restorative solidarity with Indigenous peoples, a practice outlined by Elaine Enns and Ched Myers in *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization*, offers Christians a means of recognizing the complexity of their own histories and responding with their whole selves by participating in the work of repair.

Katerina Friesen, an organizer with the Mennonite coalition working to dismantle the discovery doctrine, is grateful for the opportunity Ka' Kuxtal has offered for this kind of recognition and response. She sees the relationship as a space “to learn to follow Indigenous community self-determination and collective wisdom.” Friesen adds, “As a Christian and a Mennonite, I've been struck by their compassion toward their Low-German Mennonite settler neighbors who are actively destroying the land.”

She sees the colonists as her “distant cousins in faith” and hopes both Mennonite groups—the coalition and the Low-German Mennonites settling in southern Mexico—hear and respond to the Maya invitation to “choose life, and not the deadly ways of colonization, so that all of our descendants might live.”

The invitation into restorative solidarity is a call back into membership in the world for people who have become estranged from it. In the Chenes, there are Maya who are remembering—and even re-membering us. ❖

Lars Åkerson is an interpreter and a member of the Mennonite Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery.



THE MEASURE OF A MAN

By Michaela Bruzzese
with Charles Rodgers

Photographs
by Julien James

How can we avoid judging a person
by the worst thing they've done?

“Wait—is that Mr. C?”

one of my students asked incredulously. “THAT’S MR. C?” he repeated, making a motion of his head exploding.

The rest of the class was reacting the same way, and I couldn’t help but laugh as I confirmed that, indeed, the person profiled in the documentary we were watching—a man serving a 35-year sentence for second-degree armed robbery—was indeed “Mr. C” (Charles Rodgers), the co-teacher of our class (via video) for the past two months.

Unbeknownst to them, my students had just concretely experienced the lesson with which we started the semester: Don’t judge a person by a single story.

THE CONSEQUENCE OF A ‘SINGLE STORY’

According to author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, there is great danger in a “single story.” The single story makes a single experience, characteristic, or action in a person’s life “become the only story,” and the only story, in turn, “creates stereotypes.” More important, Adichie says, when we make one part of a person’s incredibly varied life, experiences, and decisions the only story, “It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.”

I’ve been teaching Catholic social justice to high school students for nine years. My course always includes guest speakers, documentaries, and movies in which people can tell the fullness of their whole story. The full story allows students, in Adichie’s words, to recognize our “equal humanity” and to emphasize how we are similar. In Christian terms, the revelation of another person’s dignity allows for the possibility for conversion which, in my understanding, allows us to see the truth of another’s situation from a position of equality and solidarity, not judgment (whether positive or negative).

Adichie’s assertion was the perfect lens through which I could approach my Catholic social justice class last fall because, by pure chance, I could teach the single-story concept in practice as well as in theory. I was already set to do an in-depth interview with Charles “Boston” Rodgers—the

so-called Mr. C—whose story is told in the documentary *Serving Life*. The film tells the story of a hospice program, for which Rodgers volunteered, at Angola state prison in Louisiana, and it’s a resource I use for the criminal justice unit of my class. Rodgers was released from prison in 2018, and I “met” him last year when he had a video conversation with my students after they watched the documentary.

However, for the fall semester, I wanted the new group of students to get to know Rodgers in a broader way, apart from the single story of the crime he committed and his subsequent incarceration, *before* they watched the documentary.

At the beginning of the semester, I introduced Rodgers to the class as a co-teacher, telling them about various aspects of his life—a college graduate who holds a bachelor’s in Christian ministry and counseling; an African American man raised in difficult circumstances; someone working as an HVAC tech who’s the father of a baby girl. Students enthusiastically asked questions about topics ranging from his favorite sports teams and colors to his opinions on immigration law and racism. Already the students had a more complex idea of Rodgers, beyond that of a person who served time in prison, about which they were still unaware. Rodgers told me he was looking forward to working with the students:

For me, [co-teaching the class] was a way to take my attention off myself, because I was away so long that I have to make up for lost time. I have to get myself established in a way that other 39-year-old men are already established. I’m catching up on that. So, focusing on helping students helps me distract myself from my problems and allows me to do something for others. I thought of it as “hospice” on the outside—a way to do something for others.

Although I was accomplishing my goal with the students, unknown to me, I was entering every part of my partnership with Rodgers with my own single-story biases, which kept revealing themselves as we got to know each other.

‘A TRAP FOR PEOPLE LIKE ME’

Rodgers’ 35-year sentence for robbery (unusually long for such a crime) was based on a single story of his adolescence, the story of the so-called serial juvenile delinquent. In and out of jail from age 13, he eventually ended up with 14 arrests.

The other stories of his life lend more complexity to his juvenile record. “Probably half” of his juvenile arrests, he said, were due to assault charges against his mother’s then-boyfriend. He was defending his mother from physical abuse and his sisters from sexual abuse. Those stories were not told at his sentencing. Nor was the fact that, due to his mother’s drug abuse, he was “in and out of foster care, starting at age 5,” including some situations that “were just horrible”—even some that involved family members. He talks about one particularly vicious 15-year-old cousin who “loved to torture me. I still don’t know why. I was 5 years old and staying with them because of my [mom’s drug habit]. Once, my cousin pushed me out the window—I fell 40 feet and broke everything. I was in the hospital for weeks,” he remembers. During his childhood, he was sent to at least 10 foster homes.

Despite the academic success Rodgers would later achieve in prison—he completed a GED, technical training in two trades, and a bachelor’s degree, and he also tutored other inmates—his high school record tells a different story. He told me he was disengaged and had “behavior issues.” Rodgers said, “I couldn’t focus because I was so fixated on what was going on at home.” One time, as a freshman in high school, he fell asleep in class after another late night protecting his mother from his stepfather. His teacher reprimanded him: “She told me I’d be ‘just another statistic.’ Looking back on it, she was probably trying to reach me through ‘tough love’ or something. The problem was that’s the only love I had ever had.” The teacher’s negative approach had a profound effect; Rodgers never returned to high school.

Rodgers talks about the traumas he experienced as a child—from his drug-addicted mother and a father who has been incarcerated his whole life (Rodgers has never met him) to a dangerous neighborhood and poor schools—as contributors to the “school to prison pipeline.”

I first realized that prison was a trap for me, and a lot of people like me—minorities who come from neighborhoods like the one I grew up in—when I read The Road Less Traveled by M. Scott Peck. It talks about who is statistically more likely to go to prison or go to college or whatever based on their environments. That was a huge realization. I know now that the system penalizes Blacks more harshly than whites—longer sentences, more traffic stops, etc. In my experience, it’s done maliciously and vindictively.



**“When I got treated like a human,
it made me want to be humane.”**

Rodgers’ insight is reflected in the data: The United States currently incarcerates approximately 1.8 million people, or about 650 people per 100,000. The system is notoriously biased against minorities; according to the Sentencing Project, “Black men are six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men, and Latinos are 2.5 times as likely. For Black men in their thirties, about 1 in every 12 is in prison or jail on any given day.”

We talked about who bore the responsibility for Rodgers’ situation. In my view, it was a social failure that didn’t prioritize resources for Rodgers and for his

family. But Rodgers rejected my analysis. He made it clear that this was my own single-story lens, one that failed to take in the complexity of his actions.

“At first, I blamed the world and took no responsibility,” Rodgers said. “I was angry at what I was born into—I didn’t ask to be here—my mother being what she was, and my father being what he was.” Therefore, “crime wasn’t difficult for me, because I felt like the victim.” He began breaking into cars and taking things from people “because I felt the world owed me.”

After an armed robbery charge in Louisiana, Rodgers jumped bail. When his best friend was shot and killed, Rodgers said, he and his friend’s brother went to seek revenge on the rival gang who had murdered him. When Rodgers was arrested, he was armed, and he said he was fully prepared to take that revenge. The arrest, in Rodgers’ view, thus saved lives—including, perhaps, his own.

DEVELOPING TOOLS OTHER THAN VIOLENCE

During Rodgers’ first three years in prison, he racked up more than 40 write-ups for violent behavior and served a third of the time in solitary. But, despite his growing awareness of the inherent corruption and bias in the criminal justice system, Rodgers said that prison gave him chances to change his life—chances born as much of pure luck as of his hard work.

When Rodgers was sent to prison at age 20, he immediately began filing motions for appeals. At first, he paid another inmate in Little Debbie Honey Buns to do the paperwork, but he soon mastered the legal process and was able to write his own motions, paying inexpensive lawyers to sign and file, using money he earned by building furniture and other crafts in the prison woodshop.

After a while, Rodgers began to experience a change in focus. His penchant for challenging the authority of the prisoner hierarchy and prison staff not only got old but, recalling the fights, he said, “It hurts!” He observed that “the smarter prisoners studied human behavior and learned how *not* to fight” while still maintaining respect. “I had to learn to be somebody I had no idea how to be because I never saw them growing up.” He wanted to be educated, patient, trustworthy, and responsible; he wanted to use self-control and the power of his intellect instead of violence. He used all the tools available to him: classes, books,

and the presence of professionals who frequented the prison to teach and volunteer. “I put myself wherever ‘free people’ were in the prison and mimicked their behavior,” he said.

Part of his motivation to change came from the fear and anger he felt receiving a 35-year sentence as a terrified 20-year-old. “I felt worthless, like my life had no value,” he said. At the same time, though, he “wanted to prove the judge and everyone wrong” and to show them that he was not worthless. “It was a gradual, painful process,” Rodgers said. “When I got treated like a human, it made me want to be humane, and when I was treated like an animal, I acted like an animal.” But he did not give up, encouraged by his successes and the small freedoms and trust he was able to achieve. He gained more responsibility, such as volunteering with the hospice program at Angola, editing the prison newspaper, and being able to create in the woodshop.

His amateur attempts at filing an appeal remained unsuccessful until, by chance, a benefactor who had seen the *Serving Life* documentary agreed to pay excellent lawyers (at a total cost of approximately \$20,000 to \$30,000) to take on his case. In July 2018—after several appeals, a look at his full history, including his record in prison, letters of restitution to victims, and victim support for his release—he was discharged after serving 17 years. He is now father to a 2-year-old girl and makes a living as an HVAC technician and salesperson.

FINDING A WAY IN A FAILED SYSTEM

Rodgers is upfront about the sheer corruption and bias of a criminal justice system that made it easy for him to end up in prison, and equally forthright about the fact that, although it was deeply unjust, the 35-year sentence is what forced him to take his situation seriously. For Rodgers, both facts are true:

Was it a harsh sentence? Yes. Maybe I lied to myself and thought it was a good thing, because I wouldn't have taken it so seriously if it was less time—like if it was three years, I would have been released and gone back [to my old life]. It took that long for me to come to terms with, one, I wasn't the victim and, two, I needed to be there. I came to accept that I did a lot of dirt.

The temptation of the single story, as Adichie attests, is that it becomes the whole story. But the full story is always



far more complex and demands much more complex solutions. In Rodgers' view, reform should start with intervention and prevention programs for young people at the first sign a child is having problems, such as bad grades or behavioral issues. If he had had that possibility, his story may have turned out different. But Rodgers sees opportunities for change at every step in the process—before involvement in the criminal legal system, before sentencing, during and after incarceration. “The system failed in that it didn't give incentives to improve—on a 35-year sentence, the max amount of good time I could get off my sentence was six months.” Nevertheless, amid the systemic injustice, he found a way:

I manipulated it in my favor—I tricked myself to believe it was something good, though I knew it was borderline slavery, working for 4 cents an hour. I was at Angola, which was where the slaves from Angola landed. It was formerly a slave plantation. I was angry because I realized I let them put me back in slavery.

Prison wasn't great, but I made it what I needed it to be to maintain my sanity and obtain my freedom.

Rodgers is painfully aware that the “freedom” he's obtained is only partial. Even though he has worked full time since his release and has excellent credit history and financial means, he still has difficulty renting an apartment because of discrimination based on his incarceration, let alone getting a mortgage to buy a condo or being certain of his right to vote.

My students came to know a multifaceted, complex person with a variety of life experiences. But society still judges Rodgers by the single story of a past conviction. It's up to all of us to learn a better way. ✱

Michaela Bruzzese teaches social justice courses at a Catholic high school in Albuquerque, N.M. **Charles Rodgers** is an HVAC technician in Florida who addresses churches and organizations on criminal justice reform.

R&B ARTIST MYKAL KILGORE CELEBRATES THE HOLINESS IN BEING OUR WHOLE SELVES.

By Rebecca Riley



A

A Mykal Kilgore performance isn't just a show or concert; it's an experience. Kilgore's mind-blowing vocals and presence captivate, yes, but there's more to it than that. In creating an atmosphere abundant in inclusion, empowerment, freedom, joy, truth, and

Music

love, Kilgore ministers to the soul. It's a taste of the beloved community we hunger for.

A Black queer man, Kilgore uses his platform and prodigious talent to advocate for Black and LGBTQ issues. With a Grammy nomination in 2020 for his performance of the song "Let Me Go" further raising his profile, he's getting even more opportunities to educate and entertain. In December, Kilgore spoke with writer and filmmaker Rebecca Riley via Zoom.



Rebecca Riley: When you perform, what do you hope audiences experience and take with them?

Mykal Kilgore: I want us to do a better job of being present with one another and seeing the thing inside each other that is eternal and sacred and perfect and special: I think that it is God. I want people to leave feeling like they have had a human experience at the show that allows them, and forces them, to be in their own emotions, to find pockets of empathy for others, and, more than anything else, to just truly see one another.

How would you describe your journey with faith as a Black queer man? Rocky. Having to get up in front of church every Sunday is probably what turned me into who I am today, someone who is comfortable in a crowded room, who has a strong sense of fairness and justice, who loves art and culture. The Black church did that for me. But it also planted some of the most painful ideologies inside me that I've spent my whole life trying to unlearn. Maybe because I truly feel like an adult now, I can look at my parent, the church, and go, "You did the best you knew how to do. Now, if I'm going to stay here, we're going to have to make some changes. Some of your dogma, and some of what humans did to the pureness of faith, we're going to have to pull that stuff back."

**"MY EXPERIENCE
AS A BLACK PERSON
IS AS SACRED AS IT
IS SECULAR."**

Can you give an example of a dogma you find unacceptable? That only certain people are allowed to experience the full glory of ministry. You get the sermon all the time about how God can use a donkey—God can use anyone. And then it's like "except for women, except for gay people, except for young people." That makes modern Christianity very difficult for me. When we don't allow God to be for everyone, it shrinks God's goodness. It shrinks God's majesty. And it shrinks God's desirability.

My idea of God and faith has turned into something that brings more joy than sorrow. The only moments of sorrow I really feel are [that] a lot of people feel damned to hell because somebody told them [they are], and not because of what they've experienced in God. We have done a bad job of being ambassadors, and I do hope that we rend that curtain between secular and sacred and allow the human experience to be all of it.

How do you attempt to do that with your art? Tell the truth. My experience as a Black person is as sacred as it is secular and bringing that to the stage is important to me. My experience as a queer person, my experience as an American, and some things that are even more focused, like, I'm not just a Black person, but I'm a dark-skinned Black person with locs. I'm a queer person who has no problem expressing his femininity. I feel like I'm the reflection of my parents, their good, their bad. And if God is our father, if God is our mother, I reflect that, so I deserve to be treated with that level of respect. It gives me boldness to tell the truth, to tell my story and to explore faith onstage.

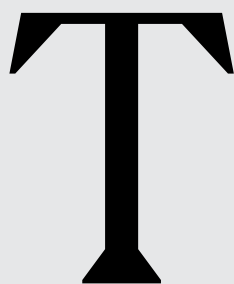
I try to treat the stage like the Pantheon. I explored it one time when I was working on cruise ships. The tour guide told us that there's a hole in the [Pantheon's] roof because whatever God brought—be it rain, sun, wind, cold, snow—the people wanted to experience in that place. There was a hole to allow God in. I want there to be a space to allow God in, and whatever God brings, we're going to be in it. [Laughs.] We're going to experience it. If God brings silence, then we'll be in that silence, and that's okay.

In September 2021 you released "The Man in the Barbershop," a song of unrequited love from a cont'd on page 41



FOREIGN INTRIGUE

By Da'Shawn Mosley



The power of the TV drama *Tehran*, about an Israeli spy who was born in Iran to a Jewish family and returns to her birthplace to help destroy a nuclear reactor, lies partly in how it parallels reality. On the other side of the screen, President Joe Biden continues to face the

fallout of President Donald Trump's decisions to withdraw the United States from the Iran nuclear deal and recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, while tensions between Iran and Israel simmer.

But relevance alone doesn't win an International Emmy Award for Best Drama. With her lifelong ties to both Israel and Iran, *Tehran*'s hacker-agent Tamar Rabinyan is a unique protagonist, and *Tehran* perfectly executes the thrills and twists that draw people to the spy genre. The show also is violent—guns, blood, an attempted rape that ends with the killing of the attacker, and a shot of a man hanged from a crane, presumably executed by the government. The more I watched, the more I felt a pang in my chest, wondering whether Rabinyan would survive.

Tehran is not all stress, though—at least not for the viewer. Rabinyan's family members become entangled with the show's plot in a pleasurable Shakespearean fashion, mirroring each other and possessing information their kin may not know but the viewer does. A romance grows between Rabinyan and an Iranian hacker named Milad. When the show pauses the action to linger on characters and personal relationships, we can reflect on the humanity of Muslim and Jewish lives. Even clichéd techniques provide this opportunity, such as a scene in slo-mo—which I would have foregone for regular-speed

footage—of Iranian university students protesting restrictions imposed by their government as other students counterprotest in support of the government's conservative stance.

Apple TV+ has lucked out in acquiring *Tehran*, adding another strong program to a lineup that includes *Ted Lasso*, *The Morning Show*, *For All Mankind*, and several shows by the one and only Oprah Winfrey. The U.S. mainstream's newfound embrace of films and TV from abroad, sparked in part by the artistry of South Korean director Bong Joon Ho and affirmed by the success of Netflix's *Squid Game*, is an exciting development, and *Tehran* is one of several Apple TV+ programs looking at life beyond the United States. Season two is underway, with multiple Emmy- and Tony Award-winning actor Glenn Close joining the cast. This sounds like a Twitter discourse on our horizon: Is her casting Western colonization, the start of a problematic trend? Perhaps *Tehran* has found a way to parallel another reality: our complex struggles with race, ethnicity, and immigration. ♦

Da'Shawn Mosley

(dashawn-mosley.com) is a former *Sojourners* associate editor and lives in the Washington, D.C. metro area.

From *Tehran*

EXPOSING INJUSTICE

Reporter Seth Freed Wessler utilizes video call footage to expose the horrific conditions of a detention center used by ICE to detain immigrants amid the COVID-19 pandemic. His documentary, *The Facility*, follows those inside as they protest for better protections and for their release.

Field of Vision



Failed Policy

In *Left Behind: The Democrats' Failed Attempt to Solve Inequality*, political historian Lily Geismer reveals how Clinton-era Democratic policy championing privatization fueled current inequalities. Geismer shows why anti-poverty initiatives fall short when the rich don't pay their fair share.

Public Affairs



Awe for Bodies

Through her dignity-affirming spiritual lens, Cole Arthur Riley of @BlackLiturgies explores three generations of family stories and faith with honest complexity in *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*.

Convergent Books

ANOTHER CORPORATE SHELL GAME

By Danny
Duncan Collum



Eyes & Ears

The latest fad among some conservative pundits and propagandists is to bash corporate executives who use their positions to promote “politically correct” causes. They call it “corporate

wokeness,” and they see it everywhere. However, this is not a new phenomenon.

In 1971, in the backwash of the 1960s, America was very much a country in crisis. Large swaths of our inner cities still bore scars left by the uprisings that followed the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. A president elected on a promise to end the Vietnam War was widening it instead. Coca-Cola had the answer to all that trouble and strife. That year, the soda company assembled 500 young people of varied races and nationalities on a hilltop and filmed them singing, “I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony.” So “corporate wokeness” was born.

Twenty-nine years later, Coca-Cola paid millions of dollars to settle a federal court case accusing it of a historical pattern of systematically underpaying and otherwise discriminating against its Black employees.

In spring 2020, just a few days after a police officer murdered George Floyd, JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon and Brian Lamb, the company’s global head of diversity and inclusion, issued a statement that “we are watching, listening and want every single one of you to know we are committed to fighting against racism and discrimination wherever and however it exists.” A week later, Dimon was photographed, with some bank employees, down on one knee in the Colin Kaepernick pose, presumably in an attempted display of solidarity.

Several months later, Dimon opposed a shareholder resolution that would have forced his company to undergo a

**CORPORATIONS DO WHATEVER WILL
MAKE THE MOST MONEY FOR THEIR
EXECUTIVES AND SHAREHOLDERS.**

racial-equity audit to root out discriminatory practices.

Shortly after George Floyd’s murder, the Twitter account of e-commerce giant Amazon, Inc., featured the following statement: “The inequitable and brutal treatment of Black people in our country must stop. Together we stand in solidarity with the Black community—our employees, customers, and partners—in the fight against systematic racism and injustice.”

Amazon then spent most of the next year waging an all-out campaign to prevent its mostly Black employees in Bessemer, Ala., from forming a union.

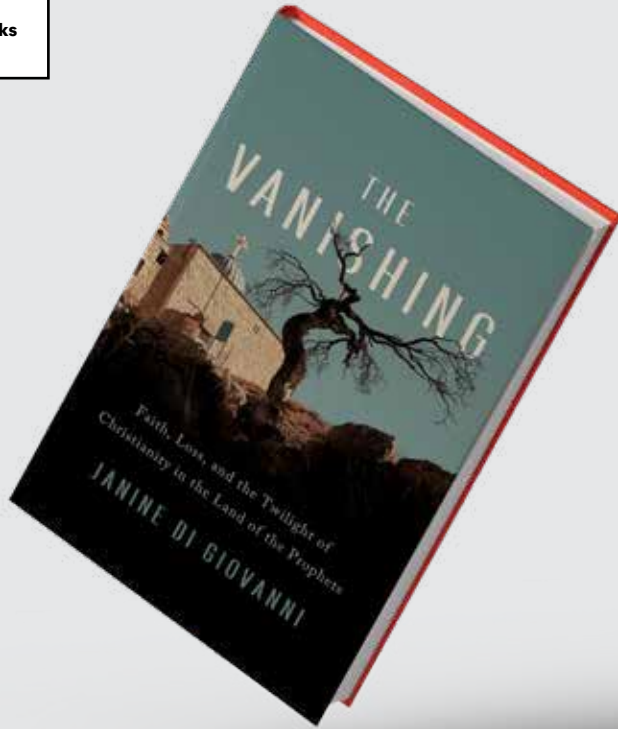
Corporations do whatever will make the most money for their executives and shareholders. If that’s redlining and union-busting, they’ll do it. When anti-racism seems like a good marketing strategy, they’ll do that, too.

The only surprise here is the people who sometimes fall for this ruse. In a 2020 article discussing Bernie Sanders’ universalist, class-based campaign, Columbia University critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw told *The New York Times*, “You basically have a moment where every corporation worth its salt is saying something about structural racism and anti-blackness ... even outdistancing what candidates in the Democratic Party were actually saying.”

Meanwhile, in the article “Labor Unions and White Racial Politics” (in the *American Journal of Political Science*), authors Paul Frymer and Jacob M. Grumbach crunched the numbers and found empirical evidence that union membership significantly reduces anti-Black attitudes among white workers. When people come together around their common interests, it seems, they also discover their common humanity.

No such evidence has emerged for corporate diversity statements or tweets. ♦

Danny Duncan Collum, author of the novel *White Boy*, teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort.



'IT FEELS LIKE AN EXTINCTION'

The Vanishing: Faith, Loss, and the Twilight of Christianity in the Land of the Prophets,
by Janine di Giovanni

Public Affairs

The scene appears idyllic: "Golden sand, a vast red horizon, and shards of light scattered across the water." But on this beach in Gaza, in Palestine, the mood is desperate. One man there describes Palestinian Christians as living artifacts of the 2,000-year-old Christian community in the Holy Land.

With grace and deep reporting, Janine di Giovanni, an acclaimed author and war correspondent, has captured the often overlooked plight of the dwindling Christian communities of the Middle East—specifically in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Palestine. *The Vanishing* is a tender if deeply disturbing travelogue, filled with stories told by Christians about the ferocious politics and desperate economics that shattered their communities. She writes in an elegiac tone while marveling at the resiliency of the few who remain.

Di Giovanni describes the trajectory of collapse, carefully providing the markedly different history of each country that nonetheless has led to similarly tragic out-

CHRISTIANS DO NOT FEEL PROTECTED BY THE GOVERNMENT AND ARE EMIGRATING IN RECORD NUMBERS.

comes. Christians in Syria were largely permitted to thrive during the Ottoman Empire, French colonialism, and after independence, only to be targeted in the latest war. In Egypt, home to some of the earliest Christian communities, Christians have become increasingly isolated, losing positions in business, education, and the medical profession. Radical Islamic gunmen have attacked convoys of Christian pilgrims and bombed churches. Christians do not feel protected by the government and are emigrating in record numbers. As one worshipper told di Giovanni, "When there is a bombing, it is always a coded message to Christians throughout Egypt: You are not welcome here."

While di Giovanni does not dwell on the high-stakes geopolitics of the Middle East, she makes clear that Christians there feel they have few allies. The U.S. government is aware of the threats to Christians throughout the region, but Washington's attention has centered elsewhere. Even the major U.S. Middle East aid commitment—multibillion-dollar aid programs to Egypt and Israel begun decades ago—has offered little help to the Christian communities in those countries and Palestine.

A Christian herself, di Giovanni is a sensitive witness, gathering revealing details. Palestinian Christians describe how sacred sites are essentially off-lim-

its to them. While foreign Christian pilgrims are free to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Via Dolorosa's Stations of the Cross, the Mount of Olives, and the Garden of Gethsemane, Israel has forbidden the native Christians of Palestine to visit without permits, which are rarely given.

In Gaza, di Giovanni attends Mass at the Church of the Holy Family, a Roman Catholic congregation that once counted 4,000 Christians in its community and is now down to 117. The economics of Israeli occupation and the local leadership of Hamas is largely to blame. Highly educated, unemployed Christians are emigrating as the only choice for survival. Palestinian Christians have declined to no more than 1 percent of the population.

Di Giovanni writes: "It feels like an extinction."

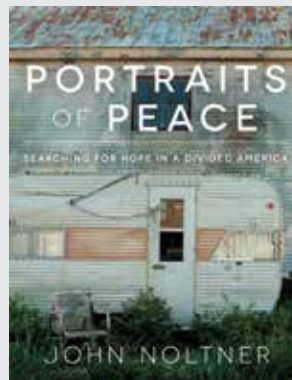
The Vanishing is an unexpected gift, preserving the story of the last remnants of Christian communities rooted in the region of the faith's birth. ✱

Elizabeth Becker is a former correspondent for *The New York Times* and author of *You Don't Belong Here: How Three Women Rewrote the Story of War*.

TELL ME YOUR STORY

Portraits of Peace: Searching for Hope
in a Divided America,
by John Noltner

Broadleaf Books



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More than a decade ago, photographer John Noltner began crisscrossing the United States to conduct interviews focused on this question: What does peace mean to you? The result was a multiyear, multimedia arts project called “A Peace of My Mind.”

Four exhibits, three books, and tens of thousands of miles later, the pursuit of peace has only become more important as the country trembles on ominous fault lines: Noltner put together his most recent book of interviews and photographs, *Portraits of Peace: Searching for Hope in a Divided America*, several months after the 2017 Charlottesville neo-Nazi riot, made final edits amid the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and fallout from the murder of George Floyd, and sent the book to the publisher just weeks before the 2020 presidential election.

Portraits of Peace weaves together unique narratives while identifying ways readers can begin dismantling biases that lead to division. As Noltner writes in a benediction of sorts, “May these stories be a beacon and a compass to guide our journey” toward “encountering difference, navigating conflict, and finding a better path forward.”

The range of voices in *Portraits of Peace* speaks volumes. Noltner’s interviewees include Black men impacted by the criminal legal system, gay and lesbian couples, two married survivors of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, undocumented immigrants, and more. Interviewees’ voices and personal peacebuilding commitments are amplified, even as their stories lay bare how loss, disability, poverty, crime, race, gender, sexuality, and religion impact their lives differently—and how acknowledging these differences might also be a step toward common ground.

Portraits of Peace focuses on individual actions rather than the systems that shape people’s lives. While building relationships can be part of healing divisions, there are structures in America that will never function equita-

PORTRAITS OF PEACE IS A FIRST STEP, NOT A DESTINATION.

bly only through love between neighbors. Pursuing justice requires much more.

While sharing our stories will not in itself right the ever-increasing wrongs in America, Noltner’s book invites readers to make room for grace rooted in accountability, listening, and action. *Portraits of Peace* is a first step, not a destination, but it could propel readers to do the next hard thing.

Noltner acknowledges that his work flows from a “poster child” for privilege—he self-identifies as a “white, middle-aged guy from the suburbs, college educated, heterosexual, cisgender, married, with 2.0 kids and a dog.” While the book reflects an artful curation of stories that honors their weight, he also acknowledges perspectives he overlooked in the past and includes times when his privilege or implicit bias resulted in broken relationships or when questions he thought would lead to common ground instead demonstrated how much he has yet to learn.

Perhaps this is one of the greatest gifts of the book: In moments where grace is neither warranted nor expected, owning our own stories—our intentions, our actions, and our impacts—is the only way forward. As Noltner writes, “the question I have to ask myself is, ‘When things get difficult, will you stay at the table?’”

✻

Liz Bierly is a *Sojourners* editorial assistant.



cont'd from page 36

Black queer perspective.

Why was writing this song important to you? I am newly of the mindset that I'm only going to write songs I need until all the songs I need are written, and then I can write other stuff. [Laughs.] I needed this song that didn't require me to change pronouns for it to apply to my life. I am of a certain age. I am of a certain background. I'm of a certain ethnicity. I'm of a certain everything, and I wrote [this] because I needed something that felt couture, that felt like the sleeves were right, the pant leg was right, everything, the waist was perfect so that when I sang it, it was healing me. I do feel a responsibility to young queer folk coming up after me, for them to feel a level of normalcy, that being queer is not something strange. That's why I wrote it—because it's so normal.

Black folks have always created spaces where we can find solace, safety, and the freedom to celebrate who we are. But Black queer folks are often excluded. What gives you hope for reclaiming those spaces? I'm always seeing moments that give me hope because young people are not accepting what some of my generation and the generation before me would accept. It's so exciting to see people with a mind for justice that goes outside of their own personal needs. It lifts my spirits when I see, especially, Black men raising a voice for Black women. As a man, even though I'm queer, I get to experience the world in a different way than a Black woman does, a Black queer woman, a [disabled] Black person. I am cisgender so I enjoy lots of privilege, but young people are teaching me every day how to either use my privilege for good or to step further away from whiteness in a way that allows for equality and equity. ✕

Rebecca Riley is a writer and filmmaker in California.

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Photo by Jeff Fuentes Gleghorn

THE VAST

By Kathleen Hellen



the vast

and all its definitions had dumbfounded. I bit the hand
that fed imagination, took

for pestilence, the flies. For end-of-world, the gully washers.
I shook in handfuls
petals fetched from

doubt
How was I to know
you'd really show?

The g/loved limbs flinging blossoms at my feet. The slender fingers signaling come-hither
The slippered slug a soft cigar
rolling between blessings and forgetfulness

When I reveled in the lonely, kin to none
you spoke a roof of stars
in the backyard of my thoughts

Kathleen Hellen's latest poetry collection is *The Only Country Was the Color of My Skin*. She lives in Baltimore.

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SOJOURNERS

WILL LENT REVEAL OUR AUTHENTIC SELF?

Scripture passages are from the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle C

By T. Denise Anderson



Living the Word

A curious thing happened among many congregations in my very white denomination after George Floyd was killed: Churches that had been at best timid to enter the work of racial justice

dove into it headfirst. Colleagues dusted off their blogs to share their thoughts. Church leaders laced up their sneakers to participate in marches. It appeared that a reckoning had occurred for countless people in the faith. They finally got it and could no longer stay silent, not while a global pandemic amplified the existing inequities in our society. It was time to act.

This would seem like good and right action, except many began this work having previously wounded leaders of color who'd tried for years to call them into it. Worse yet, there was little to no attempt to remedy their errors or circle back with the people they'd hurt. They were eager to move toward action but had to be reminded that the past still needed to be addressed before the future could be entered with justice.

If there is a "right" way to approach Lent, it involves holding our past and future in tension. The Greek words for repentance and reconciliation both connote a reciprocal change. The person on a wayward path makes a U-turn. The transgressor trades places with the transgressed. Our texts challenge us to examine who we have been, are, and are willing to become, because all of it matters to the future we will build.

T. Denise Anderson is acting director of Racial Equity and Women's Intercultural Ministries at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and lives in Louisville, Ky.

TRUE RECONCILIATION COMES ON THE HEELS OF JUSTICE.

MARCH 6

REPUTATION REPAIR

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11; PSALM 91:1-2, 9-16; ROMANS 10:8-13; LUKE 4:1-13

Lest we begin our Lenten observance believing whatever we do in the coming 40 days will alone justify us, our texts aim to properly shape our soteriology, our salvation-thinking. Each of our readings in this first week establish the salvific purview of God alone. They also encourage us to have faith in God's sovereignty and love for us.

We begin our fasts with the account of Jesus' 40-day fast in the wilderness, recalling Israel's 40 years in the wilderness. Deuteronomy 26:1-11 establishes the ritual remembrance of God's liberating act and helps us remember the details of the story. The word the Greek text uses for what Jesus goes through in the wilderness is *peirazo*, which means to analyze a thing or determine whether something can be done. Jesus' character was being examined. His desert experience shows what he is made of, which may be instructive to us. In our fasting, we are to be concerned about our mettle rather than winning a piety contest. It is as important to examine *why* we transgress as it is to refrain from transgressing. Lent should reveal our character as Jesus' test revealed his.

Psalm 91 and Romans 10 reassure us of God's generosity in salvation. Those who call upon God's name will be saved. The "name" of God refers to God's character. Calling upon God's name means leaning into and trusting in God's reputation, drawing nearer to God and away from the destruction of sin.

In Howard Thurman's 1980 baccalaureate address at Spelman College, he spoke of the need to find one's own name: "Who are you? How does the sound of the genuine come through to you?" Lent prayerfully draws us closer to the "sound of the genuine" in ourselves and the parts of us we should amplify or allow God to remedy.

MARCH 13

GRIEF AND VISIONS

GENESIS 15:1-12, 17-18; PSALM 27;
PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1; LUKE 13:31-35

After Breonna Taylor's death in 2020, I found myself drawn to the story of Mamie Till-Mobley and how her actions, after her son Emmett was lynched, catalyzed the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century. I often use art to process grief and decided to paint the story of the day she received her son's body and decided his funeral must be open casket. I found an interview where she spoke of a powerful encounter with what she believed was the presence of God. While crying out to God on the eve of that day, her bedroom filled with smoke. A voice spoke to her saying that though this one child was taken from her, she would receive thousands. Her vision recalls the promise God makes to Abram (Genesis 15:5)—promises both had trouble believing.

Grief and parental imagery permeate these texts. The readings invite us into a trust that spites the apparent circumstances. The psalmist names the threats against him but centers his trust in God. Abram is reassured that God has not forgotten the promises made to him, despite how things may look. Jesus describes a maternal anguish God has toward Herod's posturing and Jerusalem's intransigence, even as he faces imminent threat there. Paul is similarly anguished about the destruction that awaits those who oppose the gospel.

In her interview, Till-Mobley said the voice also told her that God's son died that we might have life, but her son died so that we might decide what kind of people we want to be. This is the question Lent poses to us: Who and whose will we be? She never birthed another child, but I believe those who answer the question by trusting God and seeking justice are her children—and God's.

**IN THE DESERT,
JESUS' CHARACTER WAS
BEING EXAMINED.**

MARCH 20

CHARACTER TESTS

ISAIAH 55:1-9; PSALM 63:1-8;
1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13; LUKE 13:1-9

At the beginning of Lent, Jesus' character was tested in the wilderness. This week, Paul speaks to the church at Corinth about testing and warns them about their own character. He recalls the calamity that befell some of the Israelites who, while traversing the wilderness on the way to Canaan, complained and rebelled against God. Do not be like them, Paul warns. The church had been engaging in toxic behaviors while claiming Christ. They may be under God's covering, but they are ever in danger because of their character.

Character produces results. In the gospel reading, Jesus uses recent tragedies to make a point about sin. The tendency then (and even now) was to try to rationalize why horrible things happen, and the conclusion often reached is that sin had somehow caused it. Jesus provides a sobering and equalizing perspective. Those who'd recently perished at the tower collapse in Siloam or been victim to Pilate's abomination were not worse off than anybody else. They weren't chief among sinners. Tragedy befalls the just and unjust alike. You are, however, assured of your own destruction unless you turn away from destructive behaviors. Jesus offers the parable of the fig tree that produced nothing for three years and is nearly destroyed.

In this week's text from Deutero-Isaiah, Judah's exiles were admonished to stop pursuing material things that don't matter and "seek the Lord while [God] may be found." God's thoughts and ways are not like ours. The Lenten journey is toward more Godlike thoughts and ways. We are to become better reflections of the God who has claimed and redeemed us. This God calls sternly for repentance while freely and willingly offering forgiveness. When we assume the psalmist's posture of meditating on God's way day and night (Psalm 63:6), we will find satisfaction for our souls and a change in our character.

MARCH 27

KISS AND MAKE UP?

JOSHUA 5:9-12; PSALM 32;
2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21; LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32

Each of this week's texts deal with reconciliation and restoration. Joshua 5 describes how Israel has entered a new epoch in their history and the "disgrace" of their enslavement has been rolled away. The psalmist talks of his restoration after confessing his sins before God. The gospel is the familiar parable of the prodigal who wastes his inheritance but is forgiven and restored to his family.

When we think of reconciliation, we often think of people coming together despite past conflict and "kissing and making up." In *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism*, Allan Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung challenge this notion. Coming together is the result of reconciliation but is not itself the process of reconciliation. True reconciliation comes on the heels of justice. If someone has been wronged, it is disingenuous to say, "Let's kiss and make up." Doing so asks the wronged to ignore their plight and pain. If injustice persists, restoration for either party is impossible. Reconciliation happens when people turn away from their harmful courses. Another word for this turning away is repentance. Such repentance places all parties on equal footing, and reconciliation can only occur among equals.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth that we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view. We now see everyone as God sees them. If anyone is in Christ, they are new and are embraced by God as family. They stand on higher ground, simply because they are loved by God and they follow Christ. This reconciliation is indeed radical because we are the ones who had fallen away. We are the prodigals, and yet, we're lifted above the messes we've made so that we can behold the One who loves us eye to eye. ✕

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at sojo.net/ptw.



THE (not so) GREAT REINTEGRATION

By Beth Cooper-Chrismon

As more and more of us who are *still* working remotely receive the COVID-19 booster, and as more effective treatments are developed and omicron fades into distant memory (one can always hope), the threat of returning to “normal life”—offices, restaurants, bars—looms on the horizon. White-collar workers across the nation are looking upon their professional shoes and slacks with fear and dread. Are we as a country capable of abandoning sweatpants, after all they’ve done for us?

We have grown accustomed to a softer, smaller world, a comfortable and blanket-filled cocoon of our own making, but soon we will reenter a world that is both freer and crueler. A world where people see our faces when we walk by and (God forbid) try to start conversations with us. A world where people hug us without asking first. A world where, for some reason, we are expected to *make small talk*. Calvinists and non can surely agree that this is depraved.

It will be difficult to return to professional lives that involve arduous and near-mythical rituals of the before-times such as “commutes” and “dress codes” and “supervisors who know how late we sleep in.” We may not easily remember that checking in with our coworkers is more important, and better for our mental health and well-being, than checking in with our office plants. Yes, even when Janice the fern seems desperate for a water-cooler conversation. (This is assuming your coworkers are better conversationalists than Janice. Which, depending on how much social skills have deteriorated, may not be true.)

When we return to our old social habits, will we be able to function without making significant social faux pas? Will our friends love us anyway, even when we exclaim “Wow, that baby is ugly” and realize

ARE WE AS A COUNTRY CAPABLE OF ABANDONING SWEATPANTS, AFTER ALL THEY’VE DONE FOR US?

with horror that no, we weren’t on mute, because there is no Zoom mute button in real life? Or when, in the middle of a nice gathering, we grab an armful of snacks and turn on an episode of *The Great British Baking Show*?

Certainly, socializing with intent to be noticed and admired—going to bars and restaurants, happy hours, dates—will be even more difficult. Online, from the comfort of one’s home, one of the best ways to be noticed is via social media. If you post great pictures and make jokes as cleverly and efficiently as possible, or combine a joke with a picture to make a great meme, you’ll draw a large audience and impress the right people. But in real life, if you were to emulate a meme—say, by asking everyone you meet if they have played the critically acclaimed online video game *Final Fantasy XIV*—you would be unlikely to achieve the same result.

Reintegrating into society likely will be much easier for the extroverted among us, who dreamed of this moment constantly before the vaccine and since then have already embarked on their journey to Utterly Baffling Well-Adjustment. But none of us, not even the extroverts, will benefit from the increased pressure to return to “normal” levels of activity, vanity, and overwork.

And we—the socially awkward, cozily maladjusted masses—will resist. From the comfort of our own homes, watching *The Great British Baking Show*, and wearing our beloved sweatpants. ✨

Beth Cooper-Chrismon is director of individual giving at Sojourners. She contains multitudes.

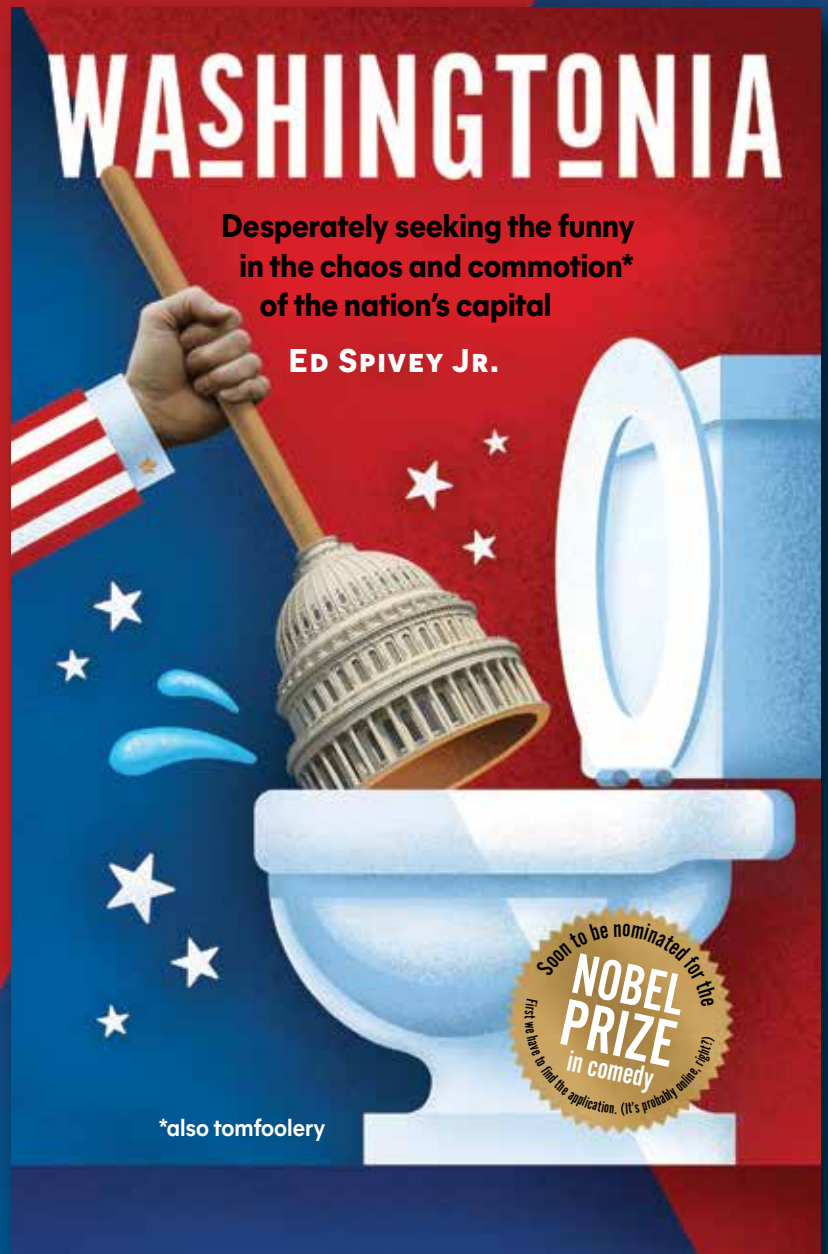
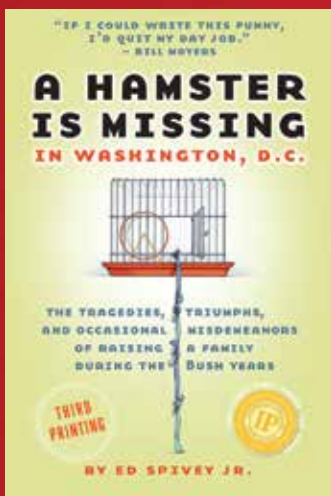
HE'S BACK!

(TOO SOON?)

You remember Ed Spivey Jr., right? Sure you do. He was the award-winning humorist for *Sojourners* until he retired to spend more time with Netflix (sorry, his family). His second book of columns, *Washingtonia*, looks back on life in our nation's capital over the past decade. And who wouldn't want to relive those years? Okay, don't answer that. But he found the funny hidden in them, even though he was told not to. (And as we all know, people who refuse to learn the lessons of history will have to repeat that class, and it will probably be early in the morning and way across campus.) His latest work is a follow-up on his first book, also award-winning, which is now in its third printing.

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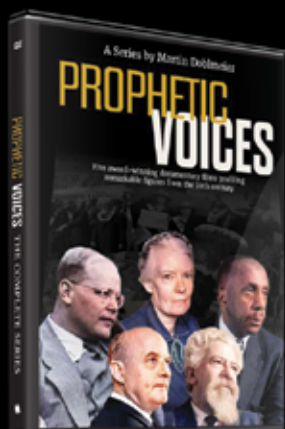


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